REVERSED RETELLINGS, BOOK 2

THE BEAST AND THE BEAUTY

AYA LING

THE BEAST AND THE BEAUTY

AYA LING

CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36

Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Epilogue

Afterword
Books by Aya
About the Author

Copyright © 2019 by Aya Ling

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Created with Vellum

INTRODUCTION

How can a woman cursed to look like a beast make a handsome prince propose marriage?

Sybil de la Roche was once the belle of the court. Now she is more hideous than any woman in the kingdom. To restore her beauty, she must receive a marriage proposal. Forty years and twenty-eight rejections later, she decides to break the curse on her own. But when a personable young man arrives, she is torn between hope and dread.

Prince Gerald is widely renowned as the best-looking man in Savony. On a quest to find a mage who has disappeared for years, he is stranded at a remote manor in a snowstorm. His interest is piqued by the mysterious woman in the manor, but his desire to get to know her is foiled by her determination to avoid him.

CHAPTER 1

Sybil stared at the mirror with the urge to hurl something at the glass.

Forty-two years. She should be used to it by now, but every time she saw those silver horns and glittering scales she was reminded of what she had lost. She wasn't like this before. She had been the most beautiful woman at court (not that there were many women at that time, but still, she had enjoyed being the most popular one), with her ivory skin, turquoise-blue eyes, and glossy hair that fell to her waist. She had beauty, brains, and the pedigree. Men had lined up for her hand in droves, and she had the luxury of choosing and rejecting them. Even the king was wild about her, sending her poetry and flowers and even building an opera house in hopes of impressing her. And just when she thought she had found the one she wanted to spend the rest of her life with… the curse occurred. Since then she had lived the life of a hermit with the appearance of a demon.

"Madame, you won't believe it!" Victoire entered the room with quick, eager footsteps. She carried a small lacquer box of black and red. "Laurent just returned from his trip and he got this beauty charm from a caravan that came all the way from Lulan. The seller told him it could turn a monkey into a ravishing beauty."

Sybil rolled her eyes—she had plenty of experience with sellers bragging about their wares—but since Laurent had made the effort, braving frosty winds and icy roads, she had to at least give it a try.

"Bring it to me."

The box was filled with rice-white powder, a small mirror glued to the lid. Elaborate designs of peonies and dahlias were painted over the smooth surface, and a faint scent of jasmines rose into the air.

“How much did he spend on this?”

Victoire shrugged. “I can ask him when you’re done.”

Sybil nodded, though if she were being honest with herself, she didn’t really want to know. They never worried about basic necessities, but they couldn’t be as extravagant as they had been forty years ago. Sybil was supposed to be dead to the outside world. She couldn’t collect rents anymore. They relied on the garden for vegetables, the dairy for milk and cheese, the mountains for meat, and sometimes Margot shopped in the village, but the main expense—magical ingredients—drained their savings, bit by bit. Sybil had to resort to selling the family jewels. It pained her, but she needed beauty spells.

Such as for the occasion today.

“It’ll be worth it,” Victoire added, seeing the crease in Sybil’s brow. “When the curse is broken.”

“If it can be broken.” Sybil didn’t bother to hide the bitter note in her voice.

“It will,” Victoire insisted, but she didn’t say when. In the beginning, when the curse was cast, they had been hopeful. But when the rejections came, one by one, the number surpassing her own rejections of her suitors, hope faded. And yet, she didn’t want to give in to despair. Who wanted to live as a beast forever?

“Help me.”

The powder was duly applied. Sybil’s skin was dull gray and the scales created a rough, uneven surface, but luckily, the beauty charm justified its price tag. By the time they were done, even Sybil couldn’t find fault with her complexion. The powder concealed her scales, leaving only the faintest traces that one had to squint to make out. Her skin was now pure alabaster white, glowing in the dim light cast by the candlesticks on her dresser. The inhuman silver color of her eyes was dimmed to light gray, and her wide mouth was reduced to the shape of a petite rosebud.

She looked almost normal.

“You’re beautiful. *Real* beautiful,” Victoire said, sounding awed. “This is working better than any charm we bought. Those Lulan merchants sell better spells than any of those Arksan fools.”

“Spare me the flattery,” Sybil said, though she was secretly pleased. At least there was one advantage of the curse: she didn’t age. But becoming beautiful wasn’t enough. She needed a marriage proposal.

Victoire brought out her hennin: a cone-shaped cap made of a crimson velvet, with a shimmering veil draped over it. The hennin had gone out of fashion—women usually wore caps sans veils or hoods now—but the headgear was necessary. Thanks to the curse, Sybil had a pair of curved horns sprouting from her head, making her look like a ram. Elegant pearl-white gloves were slipped over her hands, reaching right up to her elbows, and thick woolen stockings covered her feet completely. Her hands—or rather, claws—resembled a bear’s, and her feet were dark with fur.

Sybil held her head high as she entered the dining room, moving as gracefully as if she were treading on water. The curse had no influence on her posture, though it had deprived her of her beauty.

There, seated in the end of a long table, was her victim.

Guest, she corrected in her head. And soon-to-be husband, if everything went well.

He was an ordinary-looking man with a square face, thin hair, and a small chin. When he stood up, she noted with slight alarm that he was shorter than her. If she were her original self, this man wouldn’t even qualify as her footman. *Don’t be judgmental*, she chided herself. *Laurent isn’t tall either, but he’s the best steward and more like a family friend.*

The man looked at her and his jaw dropped, revealing yellow, crooked teeth. She should be glad that her disguise worked, but when he revealed those teeth, she found herself shrinking away. Sybil reminded herself she was in no position to be picky.

“Monsieur.” She swept him a magnificent curtsy that would draw approval in a ball dance. “May I offer you a glass of wine?”

He grinned. “Sure, if you’re joining me.”

Sybil settled in the chair Laurent pulled out for her. Vases overflowing with roses and ferns were tastefully arranged on the table. The candles were dimmed in a way to bathe her face in a mellow glow. Everything was carefully engineered to seduce a man.

Break the curse, she repeated in her head as she shook out her napkin and laid it across her lap. Anything objectionable can be dealt with later.

Flavien entered with a bottle of fine wine, and Margot followed with a huge tray bearing two silver platters. The man gazed at the food and then

back at her, as if he couldn't believe his luck. Apparently he wasn't used to such hospitality. Saliva formed at the corner of his mouth, and she desperately wished that he would wipe it off. Was he blind? There was a delicately-folded napkin in front of him!

"So where do you hail from?" she inquired. "What stroke of fortune brings you to this remote corner of Savony?"

He was too willing to answer. "The name's Emeril, Mademoiselle. I'm from Tybalt."

Tybalt. It was a small southern town in Arksar, the kingdom north of Savony. A huge forest and a steep mountain stood between Arksar and Savony, so while Tybalt was close to Sybil's manor, it took several days by carriage around the foot of the mountain. No one wanted to scale the mountains unless they had a desire to seek their end on the permanently frozen top.

Emeril went on. He was a carpenter, who came looking for high-quality spruce and oak in the forest. If he found what he was looking for, he assured her, he would seek the owner of the lands and negotiate for a reasonable deal. But his emphasis on his honesty implied he would poach if he could get away with it.

"What about you, Mademoiselle? Why is a lady like you living alone in the middle of the forest?"

"My parents are deceased," she replied. Pain laced her voice; she remembered how her mother had shrunk away from her, shrieking in terror. "But it is also their wish that I not live by myself. It is rather lonely, with no one but my servants to keep me company."

Laurent tipped more wine into Emeril's glass. The plan was to ply him with wine and dull his senses. Make him forget why a distinguished lady would be interested in a carpenter with crooked teeth.

The wine took effect. As the meal progressed, his cheeks grew redder and redder, and his speech became slurred. Sybil waited patiently, though her hands curled into fists under the table.

I need you to propose, she thought in her head. *I need you to say those words.*

He held out his wine glass. "De...li...cious," he slurred.

Laurent moved forward, but Sybil held up her hand. She took the bottle from him and walked over to Emeril.

"You must have more," she coaxed. "Tell me your impression of me."

“Weeeeell…” He raised his face and stared at her. “I don’t understand. Why are you welcoming into your home, as if I am the king?”

“Because… because you attracted me,” she lied, hating every word she spoke. “And I am tired of being alone.” That was the truth anyway.

“Indeed.” He grinned at her, revealing those crooked teeth again. Sybil pasted on an adoring smile, but her insides were screaming in protest. “What kind of man are you looking for? You should get married.”

Hope flared in her heart.

“I don’t have high standards,” she said quietly. “Just someone agreeable. Someone who will keep me company.”

He drained the glass and the crimson liquid ran down his neck. She couldn’t stand it any longer. Sybil grabbed a napkin and dabbed the side of his mouth.

He gazed at her, as if already entranced by her magically-bestowed beauty. The next second, he grabbed her wrist.

Alarmed, she tried to free herself. “Monsieur, please.”

Emeril grinned. “Didn’t you want someone to keep you company? I’m right here, Mademoiselle.”

By this time, she couldn’t think of anything but to escape his grip. As a beast, she had strength to match an average man. Sybil yanked her hand backward, but it turned out to be a huge mistake.

When she drew back, her glove was ripped away. Her hand—if it could be called a human hand—was bared. An ugly, deformed limb, charcoal gray, with claws. Coarse, dark hair covered her fingers, making it like a cross between a paw and a human hand. Silver claws gleamed on the tips of her fingers.

Nothing could be more grotesque.

The man jerked as if pulled by puppet strings. The sight of her hand had jolted him out of his stupor.

“What the…” His eyes were saucer-wide. “You’re a witch! Demon!”

Sybil quickly hid her hand behind her back, but it was too late. “Monsieur, you must be hallucinating,” she began in a soothing tone. “Please calm dow—”

“That was why you were so kind to me!” He jumped up and pointed at her with a shaking finger. “I knew there was something odd when a lady is living by herself. You were planning to get me drunk and boil me in a cauldron!”

He bolted from the room. Laurent looked toward Sybil, but she shook her head. It was a hopeless case.

Sybil stalked back to her room, ripping off her hennin and throwing it against the wall. She sat down on the bed and let the tears run down her face. Forty years ago, a man like Emeril wouldn’t be even fit to wipe her shoes, much less reject her.

This was it. No more attempts to seduce a man. She was going to break the curse on her own.

CHAPTER 2

"There's a demon livin' in the mountains."

Gerald paused as he handed over a coin for the meal. The farmer watched him, puzzled.

"Ya don' seem shocked. I ain' lyin'; I saw it wi' my own eyes. It was this tall—" the farmer indicated a person near Gerald's own impressive height "—it had *horns* when the wind took off its hat, and its eyes were creepy, I tell ya. Silver an' gleamin', like they could see into yer soul."

Having seen hundreds of hulking, bloodthirsty trolls, Gerald couldn't feel terrified. But he was surprised.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur, I didn't mean to imply you were lying. But I find it rather difficult to believe that a demon exists in Savony."

"It doesn' come out often," the farmer said. "My father told me about it when I was a child. I believed 'im then, but when I grew up I thought 'e was making it all up. Then when my wife had our third son, I saw it. Went to gather mushrooms in the mountains—wild mushrooms bring in more dough, you see—and there it was, standin' o'er an animal—a deer, I think. It was holding a gleaming knife in its furry paws. I let out a yell and ran fer my life."

Gerald found the story entertaining. "If it was standing over a deer, it might not be interested in humans."

"It scared me out o' my socks!" The farmer's face was red and indignant. "I'd wager you'd wet yer pants if *you* came across it, yer pup. Yer tall, but yer as slender as a lady."

Gerald groaned. He knew he was blessed with stunning looks, but he'd rather look less striking than possess a beauty on the feminine side. The

twins often made fun of him and called him Princess Gerald, flower of the family, the belle at the castle, etc. More than once they begged him to wear a dress and mingle with the court ladies. “Thanks for the warning, but I’m afraid I have to go. A good day to you, Monsieur.”

He left the house, mounted his mare and rode off. A few villagers gawked at him despite the spectacles perched on his nose. He was relieved when the houses disappeared behind him and he could focus on his journey.

Several days had passed since he left the castle. With Freja’s enchanted compass as his guide, he was now in the northeast region of the kingdom. The color changed from umber to chestnut brown; the lighter the color, the nearer the objective was. He pulled out the compass under his cloak and laid it on his palm. A tap sent it spinning, pointing north. The tip was now the color of a ripe orange—he was getting closer.

Snow was falling around him as he urged his mare on. An hour later, he came across a frozen pond. Using a simple heating spell, he melted the ice into water. Both mare and man quenched their thirst and went on.

Gerald took off his spectacles and tucked them in a leather bag. The snow was falling more and more heavily, and it was a nuisance having snow gather on the glass. After all, the spectacles were supposed to make him appear less dazzling, and in this thick forest that bordered Savony and Arksar, there was no need to keep up appearances.

It was getting dark, though it was only mid-afternoon. Gerald never liked winter, when nights were devastatingly long and the lands covered in a quilt of ice and snow. Some of his siblings didn’t mind—Etienne, for example, enjoyed snowboarding over the hills, and Dumas liked to pester his older brothers for a snowball fight. But then, it was the harsh bitterness of winter that made him appreciate the verdant splendor of spring and summer.

He consulted the compass again and made sure he was heading in the right direction. Although, from the look of the weather, it wouldn’t matter if he veered a little off track. Even a magic user could not survive in a snowstorm without food and shelter.

“Come on,” Gerald urged his mare. He scanned the landscape ahead for a house, a hut, or just a shed. He needed a roof over his head for the night. Perhaps it was a bad idea that he chose to travel alone, but he had been confident. He had been certain that by traveling alone, he could go swifter.

He’d find the mage sooner, and they’d be able to conquer the trolls and send them back to their own place.

The trees ahead of him thinned into a clearance. Gerald rode out of the forest and found a large river with stormy waters that rolled and crashed. A wooden bridge covered with a thick layer of snow stretched over the river.

Should he cross the bridge, or should he return to the forest?

Gerald gripped the reins and pondered his options. The bridge looked well built, but the snow would add weight. A lot of weight. To his eyes, the bridge seemed to sink an inch lower due to the snow.

But the forest—at least the part he was in—was inhabitable. He had ridden for hours and nary a human in sight. It was possible that there might be a house just minutes away, but it was also equally possible that he’d ride for another several hours in vain.

And then he saw a light shining across the river. He blinked, hoping it wasn’t an illusion. But even though he tried to convince himself otherwise, his eyes weren’t deceiving him. There *was* a light, distant though it was.

Gerald made his decision. Clutching the mane of his mare, he whispered, “Let’s make it a fast one.”

He dug his boots into the mare’s sides and urged her on. The later they tried to make it, the bigger risk there was.

Snow crunched under his mare’s hooves as they sped over the bank and headed toward the bridge. But upon approaching the bridge, his mare slowed down, apparently scared by the rolling waters.

“Come on,” Gerald coaxed. “If we don’t go on, we’ll freeze to death.”

Finally, with his persistent urging, the mare readied itself and set off with a neigh.

They went over the bridge, as snow continued to fall fast and thick, and the turbulent icy waters crashed and thundered below.

Almost there...he could see the light ahead, shining through the thick of the bushes. Just a few more inches and they’d be on the other side.

Crack!

The snow-laden wood gave away, all air sucked out of his lungs, and he was clawing desperately as they fell through. The roll and crash of the icy waves below whistled by his ears. A moment of imminent death flashed through his mind—he could picture Theo, Roland, his brothers, his mother

and aunt—all of them trapped in the silver woods while the trolls surrounded them with bloodthirsty eyes.

He couldn't die.

His outstretched arm touched something solid—a branch! Gerald grabbed the lifesaver and realized it was part of an old tree which, by some miracle, grew on the edge of the river bank.

Snap—

The branch broke. His reflexes kicked in—Gerald threw both arms around the trunk and held on, desperate for anything, anything to stay alive. He didn't dare to look down, for fear his nerves would crumble and he'd slip.

Must. Stay. Alive.

The longer he held on, the sooner his arms would give out. Gerald dug his heels into the bank, searching for crevices, but the wall was solid rock. He could hear the trunk creaking from his weight—any moment later, it would give way.

Pulling the obsidian knife from his pocket, Gerald drove it into a spot above the tree. The blade pierced the rock as easily as if it were fresh cheese. Relief and gratitude flashed through his mind. Theo had insisted that he take the knife.

Gerald hoisted himself over the tree while holding onto the knife. He pulled the blade out of the bank and made a second hole slightly above the first hole. He dug his boots into both holes and, with the knife, created more holes above them. Slowly but steadily, he used the crevices to climb up the bank.

Finally he reached the top of the bank. Exhausted from the effort, he let go of the knife and rolled on the snow, panting heavily. Despite the freezing temperature, he was sweating from his climb. Snowflakes drifted on his face, reminding him he had to keep moving, or freeze to death.

Gerald got to his feet. A pang of agony pierced him when he thought of his beloved mare, perished in the icy river. How was he going to find Urdu, the most powerful mage alive? They needed the mage's help to fight the terrible trolls living beneath the castle.

Urdu isn't even on top of your worries now, he reminded himself. *The first thing is to survive this brutal storm.*

The light in the distance hadn't faded, thank the magi. He staggered toward it, praying that he'd be able to reach someone who'd be able to

help him. A bush snagged on the edge of his cloak. Irritated, he tugged the fabric away, not caring if the edge was ripped.

Snow was falling, thick and fast. His vision was blurred, but he had to go on. Once or twice the light disappeared, so he had to retreat his steps and start again. Finally, a wall appeared—the center was a gate built of iron. Icicles encrusted the ironwork of the gate. The light was shining from a large house within the wall.

His spirits buoyed, Gerald picked up his pace and tried to move as fast as he could toward the gate. Alas, it was locked. A heavy padlock around the door prevented it from opening, no matter how hard he pounded. Even if he weren't exhausted, he wouldn't have been able to open the door.

Gerald shouted. He cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered as loud as he could. But exhaustion from his narrow escape prevented his voice from traveling far, and the howling wind muffled the volume, while sending snow swirling around him. Moreover, the house was far from the gate. Normally there would be a path, but the snow was so heavy that any path was obliterated. Unless someone was strolling in the gardens (as if anyone would have the madness to do so), he wouldn't be heard.

His fingers were numb, his throat parched, and he tasted blood on his lips—they had cracked from the cold. All he had was a small heating spell in a corked bottle. Activating the spell, Gerald carried the bottle in his gloved hands and tried to make his weary mind work.

All his other spells had fallen into the river, along with his mare. He'd have to rely on his human strength. He could try climbing over the wall or walking around it to see if there was another entrance. Either method seemed improbable. The wall was seven or eight feet high, covered with snow. And most manors didn't need more than one entrance.

And then the solution hit him. He had the Peerless Knife. It could slice through anything.

Gerald unsheathed the knife and drove it into the gate. The knife met resistance—the gate was thicker and sturdier than expected—but it did go through. He sawed and cut, using every ounce of his remaining strength. By the time he managed to make an opening in the gate that was large enough to pass through, he was on the brink of fainting away.

He got down on his knees and crawled through the gate. He staggered on the path—his legs felt like sacks of flour—his vision was so blurred that he lost his balance and sprawled over the snow. His head hit

something hard—was it a stone statue? There was a dull pain, numbed by the coldness, and then he knew no more.

CHAPTER 3

"Milady, it's too cold to go out."

Sybil paused at the doorway opening into the sitting room. Through the windows, snowflakes swirled in large white mists, the gardens outside blanketed in white. The hedges were half their normal height, the rest buried under the snow.

She hadn't realized how bad the weather had become. She was so engrossed in studying the process of constructing a tracking spell that she barely heard the wind rattle against the window panes, barely paused to reflect that it wasn't possible to go out today.

This snowstorm looked serious enough to keep them indoors for a while.

"Do we have enough food?"

"We've got plenty stocked up," a cheery voice rang through the room. Victoire entered with a tray of steaming hot tea. "Mama checked the pantry. We have plenty of potatoes and cured ham and apples—enough to last for weeks."

Victoire's mother, Margot, was also the cook. A plump, rosy-cheeked woman, she had once worked in the castle and mastered a lot of Savony delicacies, such as orange-glazed duck breasts, and bacon shaped into roses and roasted with asparagus. The problem for Margot, though, was not her skills but the trips required for acquiring delectable ingredients and exotic spices.

Clink. Victoire set the tray on a mahogany table with clawed feet. "I'll be mending your gloves, milady, if you don't need me." Sybil's claws made it easy to rend gashes in her clothes.

“You may take a rest,” Sybil said, looking down on her clawed hands. How she wished for a spell that would transform them into human hands, if only for a while. “I don’t need to wear gloves now.”

“Oh, I don’t really mind,” Victoire said, glancing at the window. “There’s not much I can do when the weather’s so bad, and I hate being bored. And who says you won’t be needing the gloves? Someone might come by when the snow’s over.”

“Unlikely.” And even if a man were to drop by, she wasn’t going to seduce him. She had had enough.

Victoire, with her endless reservoir of optimism, shrugged and trotted away. During the forty-two years under the curse, about a hundred people had found their way to the manor, and about one third were unattached men. None of them were able to break the curse. Who could fall in love with a beast?

Sybil poured herself a cup of tea. It was fragrant and sweet with a slight tangy taste, as Margot had tossed in a few apple pieces and a dash of honey. Just the way she liked it. She supposed it was Margot’s way of showing sympathy after that disastrous event with her last “suitor.” Every rejection was followed with an elaborate meal—well, as elaborate as they could afford to make it.

She went to the tall, arched windows and peered outside, her right hand wrapped around the teacup. Her fur insulated her skin from getting scalded, and the extra friction from the claws made it easier to hold the cup—though also easier to shatter it. But the convenience was nothing compared to the beauty she had lost.

Once upon a time, men had rode through snowstorms like this, only to catch a glimpse of her face. She could still remember Sir Lamoignon, his dark cloak flowing around his well-honed body, striding toward the manor, and in his eagerness he had tripped and fell flat on the snow. It was a comical sight, for he was known to be a man of few smiles and keen to maintain his reputation. No other person in Savony—except for her and Victoire—had the privilege of seeing Sir Lamoignon sprawled headfirst on the ground in an undignified heap.

Forty years, and yet her memory of him wasn’t diminished. She could see him and his dark cloak, a vivid contrast against the pure white snow.

Sybil froze. She blinked and looked again—she wasn’t imagining things. There *was* someone lying in the snow, right in front of the manor.

“Laurent! Flavien!”

The steward and footman appeared in mere seconds. The curse affected her voice as well. She couldn’t yell—she could only screech like a banshee.

“Milady?”

“There’s a man outside.” She raised a furry hand and pointed a clawed finger at the window. “He looks to be dead...or unconscious. Quick, get him in.”

“Right away, milady.”

In a moment, Laurent and Flavien had brought the mysterious man into the parlor.

“We need more blankets,” Laurent said. Although he never had formal training, he had a doctor friend in the village and was able to administer treatment for simple injuries or illnesses. “Flavien, remove his cloak and boots, as well as any item of clothing that’s damp. He must be kept warm and dry.”

“Is he alive?” Sybil said.

“Barely. Another hour out there, and he’d be dead.”

“What made him show up in this weather?” Flavien muttered. Sybil was thinking the same thing. The remote location of the manor made it difficult for visitors to come by in summer, not to mention in a snowstorm.

Victoire brought a pile of downy quilts. Another servant unearthed a basket and collected the stranger’s clothes, lest they drip melted snow on the rug and floor. Sybil went to the kitchen and instructed Margot to prepare hot broth. When she returned, the man was tucked comfortably in bed, though he was still unconscious.

“How did he come in?” Laurent said. “I made sure to lock the gates last night.”

Laurent was a meticulous Arksan to his core. If he said he locked the gates, Sybil would never doubt him.

“Suppose you check the gates and wall,” she suggested. Not that she was afraid of robbers, as the manor was so far away from populated areas, but she was curious as well. The mysterious guest could be unusually gifted in climbing, or he could have used some kind of spell. Perhaps he was a mage. She hoped it was the latter, no matter how tiny the chance was. If she were to break the curse on her own, she needed a mage.

Sybil approached the bed. She had researched so many books on mages that she was certain she could recognize one.

The stranger was lying on his back, eyes tightly closed. Still, she put on her veil and slipped on a pair of mittens, just in case.

And then she drew back, her heart thudding in her chest.

He was the most beautiful creature she ever saw. Hair the color of burnished gold, eyelashes long and curved, and features so stunning that it seemed as if a mage had taken every beauty spell and created perfection.

Behind her, Victoire gasped.

“Milady, he’s even more beautiful than when you weren’t under the curse.”

“He is,” Flavien agreed, his eyes bulging like a toad’s. “All he needs is a dress.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you two,” Sybil said. “Will he be all right?” she asked Laurent, who was taking his pulse.

“Yes, milady. He is chilled from the weather, but he has a strong constitution. Looks like he’s kept himself in good condition with plenty of exercise. A few days of sufficient rest and care, and he will be back to normal.”

Too good-looking to be human, and athletic as well. She supposed that he also had a flawless character.

Laurent rose. “Best that we leave him to rest, and when he wakes up, feed him the broth. He needs something hot inside him.”

“I’ll watch over him,” Victoire piped up. She looked absolutely excited at the tedious task, but Sybil couldn’t blame her. The man was simply the most gorgeous creature they had ever seen. “I’ll serve him food when he wakes up.”

Sybil left the room. Laurent came to meet her with a grave face.

“The gate is hacked to pieces. There are thirty-seven bars, their lengths ranging from three to twelve inches, and...”

“No need for more details, thank you,” Sybil cut him off. “So he forced his entrance by cutting down the gate.” Her heart sank. He couldn’t be a mage, then. A mage wouldn’t need to resort to drastic methods—he or she could magically unlock the gate.

“You saved his life,” Flavien said, rubbing his hands in glee. “We’ll convince him to stay for a longer period, and maybe he’ll grow attached to you, and...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sybil said flatly. “Do you think he’d grow attached to horns and fur?”

She turned away, determined that she wasn’t going to subject herself to the same humiliation again. Once the mystery man woke up, she would send him on his way.

CHAPTER 4

Gerald dreamed. He was standing in the arena, surrounded by trolls, and they were all staring at him with hunger in their eyes. Some of them had saliva dripping down their front, and others were gnashing their teeth together. The stuff of his worst nightmares.

And then he dreamed the clock had picked Roland, and there was nothing they could do about it. Roland hadn't recovered from his injuries, blood was seeping from his wound, but his face was pale and determined.

The scene changed, and he found himself staring at a huge troll, his hands wrapped around Roland's body... Somehow his younger brother was the size of a mere dog, and the next second, he would be eaten by the troll, bones and all.

NO! His eyes flew open, and he found himself staring at a velvet canopy.

A canopy. He must be lying in bed.

"You're awake!" someone chirped. Gerald sat up and rubbed his eyes. A young woman around Beatrice's age was standing near the bed, gazing at him with large, adoring eyes, an altogether familiar expression. She would've been pretty if her front teeth didn't protrude like a chipmunk's, but she had a cheerful, friendly face that made Gerald feel he could trust her at first glance. A large enamel locket dangled over her front.

"You must be hungry." She ladled liquid into a bowl. Steam rose from the bowl. "Be careful; it's still hot. If you can't use the spoon, I can help you there."

Gerald flexed his fingers. He doubted he was strong enough to go for a run, but sipping from a bowl of soup was no trouble.

“Thank you for your kind offer, but I can eat by myself.” He ignored her disappointment and grasped the spoon.

The soup was delicious, much to his surprise. Aromatic and flavorful, with just the right amount of spices (parsley, basil, and sage), and with the right amount of cream. Even the temperature was just right—hot, but not scalding. It didn’t taste like the cooking of an Arksan.

She was staring at him with an adoring expression he recognized too well. He coughed and searched for something to say.

“What’s your name, Demoiselle?”

“Victoire.”

A name that was more common with his grandmother’s generation. Her mother must be old-fashioned when it came to naming.

“Can you tell me where I am?”

“You’re in the house of the de la Roches.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t remember when he heard of it. It was also possible that owners of the house were not of noble origin. One didn’t have to hold a title to purchase a grand-looking old house.

“Who are you?” Victoire said. “Are you from the capital?”

Gerald debated whether to tell her the truth. It should be easier to receive assistance if they knew he was a prince.

“My name is Gerald.”

“Are you, by any chance, the second eldest prince?”

“Yes.”

She squealed and clapped her hands like delighted child. “I just knew it! We might be far away from the capital, but we’ve heard all about you and your brothers.”

Gerald wondered if she had heard about the trolls. “I hope that the rumors about us are not as negative as we have been given to believe.”

“Oh no.” She shook her head and let out a sigh. “You’re everything I expected and more.”

Just at that moment, a plump, middle-aged woman showed up at the door. She wore a white apron, and there was a hint of flour on her wrists. She had to be the cook, or one of them.

“Vicky, you promised you’d return and help me prepare her ladyship’s dinner.” Her gaze fell on Gerald, and her eyes widened.

Her ladyship’s dinner. So the manor belonged to a lady.

“Mama, you won’t believe it! This is Prince Gerald, all the way from the capital!” Victoire bounced up and down, as if she had won a bag of gold.

The woman gasped and put a hand to her face, leaving a smudge of flour on her chin. “It can’t be! Oh dear, you should’ve told me; I should’ve changed out o’ my apron.”

“Please, there’s no need for formalities.” Gerald tried to rise, but his sore arms screamed protest. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Madame.”

“It’s Margot, Your Highness,” she said, trying to sink into a deep curtsy, but when she wobbled, she grabbed onto the door frame. “Was the broth to your liking?”

“It was excellent. Your cooking skill is outstanding.”

She blushed and stuttered as if she were the same age as her daughter. Gerald wished he had his spectacles, but they had fallen into the river.

Finally the two women left, both of them telling him repeatedly to let him know if he needed anything. Victoire looked back twice, as if she was never going to see him again.

“There’s a bell pull by the bed. Give it a yank and someone’ll come right away.”

“Or you can just yell.”

“Vicky, he just woke up. He can’t yell.”

When both of them were gone, Gerald peeled away the blankets. His clothes were gone, replaced with a dressing gown of moderate quality that apparently belonged to the middle-class. His first instinct was astonishment mixed with indignation, then he remembered Odeon mentioning something about dealing with frostbite. Clothes should be stripped off, replaced by warm, dry layers.

He fell back on the pillow with a sigh of frustration. He ought to be thankful—he had nearly lost his life—but on the other hand, he had lost everything. Money, spells, and his beloved mare. And most crucially, the enchanted compass was gone.

Someone tapped on the door. This time, two men entered. One was middle-aged, and had the distinct pale blond hair and ice-blue eyes of an Arksan, as well as being meticulously dressed. Yet while he looked

Arksan, his height was definitely on the short side—he was barely taller than Victoire. The other man was a few years older than Victoire. He had curly brown hair, brown eyes, and was staring intensely as if Gerald was a rare creature that could fetch a sack of gold ducats.

“Laurent at your service, Your Highness,” the Arksan said, approaching the bed. “How are you feeling? Anywhere hurting or itching?”

“Laurent’s our medical man,” the brown-haired man said. “Officially, he’s the steward, but he’s been friends with the village doctor for twenty years, and often accompanied the doctor on his visits. I’m Flavien, by the way. Victoire is my sister. Don’t mind her—her head turns into cotton when she sees a good-looking man.”

Gerald felt over his body and rotated a few limbs. His arms were sore from the effort climbing on the river bank, and his head ached from hitting something solid, but generally he didn’t seem to suffer from anything serious.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Thank you—I would have frozen to death if you didn’t save me.”

“Thank our mistress,” Flavien said, grinning. “She’s the one who discovered you lying in the snow outside.”

“Then I must thank her in person,” Gerald said. “Once I am in a more presentable state.”

The two men exchanged a glance—Laurent seemed to be hesitant, while Flavien waved a hand, as if to say there shouldn’t be any problem.

“Of course,” Flavien said. “We’ve divested you of your clothing to get heat into your body, but Laurent here can lend you something to wear before your clothes are properly washed and dried. That is, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Gerald assured him. “But may I have my clothes back? I have some items in the pockets, and I hope they didn’t fall out.”

“As you wish.” Flavien bowed. “Although our laundress should have retrieved them by now.”

“Is there anything else we can do for you?” Laurent asked.

A horse and a pouch of ducats, but Gerald resolved not to mention his needs until he met the mistress of the house. He guessed she was an elderly woman, likely widowed, as most owners of manor houses were men. He took confidence in the fact that he rarely encountered any

difficulties when requesting a favor from an old woman. There were several instances he succeeded in bargaining for a spell or magical ingredient.

He looked around the room. Tapestries of pine green adorned the oak paneling; tables and chairs were made of walnut, gilded with gold. The curtains around the bed were tied to tall posts with gold-tasseled ropes, and the blankets covering his body were heavy and downy, even more comfortable than the ones at home.

They treated him like a royal guest, and that was before they knew his identity. His chest warmed; he resolved to thank the lady of the manor when he was better.

A while later, Victoire bounced into his room, carrying a basket.

“Here are your clothes, Your Highness. The laundress was going to wash them, but I stopped her in the nick of time.”

Her cheeks were rosy red as she placed the basket by the bed. Gerald thanked her courteously. To his dismay, all pockets were empty except for the Peerless Knife and a heating spell sealed in a jar.

“Did the laundress find anything in my clothes before she put them in this basket?”

“I’ll ask her.” Victoire disappeared. In a moment she returned with empty hands and an apologetic face. “She said she never touched the clothes, so any items would be in the basket.”

Gerald closed his eyes for a second. It had to be during his climb up to the river bank. His compass, purse, all other items that he was carrying must’ve fallen out of his pockets. His luggage, tied to his saddle, was gone with his horse.

Victoire sat on a stool near the bed. “I’m so sorry,” she said, looking as sad as if she were the one who lost everything. “But if you need anything, you have only to ask.”

“That is most kind of you,” he said, without much emotion in his words. “I...I’m afraid I’m a little weary at the moment.”

“Of course. You take all the rest you need, Your Highness.”

Victoire closed the door. Gerald lay back on his pillows and stared at the ceiling. He should be thankful he was alive. But most of his possessions were gone—everything except the knife and the bracelet Freja created. Thankfully he was wearing the latter, or the bracelet would have disappeared as well.

Making sure he was alone, Gerald tapped the sapphire on the bracelet and composed an oral message, explaining that he was safe but stranded in the northeast of Savony. Freja had enspelled the bracelet, enabling them to send messages and keep each other updated on their progress.

He lay back in his pillows, drowsiness spreading in his body. The room was toasty warm, making him want nothing but to close his eyes. Before he drifted off to sleep, he prayed that the compass he lost was the wrong one, and that either Claudia or the twins would find luck in locating Urdu.

CHAPTER 5

"Milady, he is the prince."

"One of twelve princes," Sybil said. "And it doesn't matter if he's a prince or merchant or ogre, I am NOT dressing for dinner. Tell Margot to prepare a meal tray and send it to my room."

Victoire reluctantly put down an elaborate teal dress, trimmed in lace and ribbons, the cuffs folded back and embroidered with pearls. Forty years might have passed, but Victoire was determined to keep up with the latest fashions. Once every year she'd have Laurent bring a sample from Padoux, the nearest town. She was not going to have Sybil's suitors wondering why the lady of the manor dressed like their grandmothers.

"We have a few beauty spells left," Victoire said. "Even if there isn't much chance, you'll have none if you don't try."

Sybil glanced at the brass-rimmed mirror in the corner of the room. It was the only one she possessed, as she couldn't bear to look at her reflection more than necessary. Silver eyes gazed back at her, scales marring her once faultless complexion. Her fingers—no, claws—brushed against the smooth satin of her gown, threatening to leave ugly grooves were she to increase pressure. Dark fur covered her neck, hands, and feet. During winter she wore scarves, gloves, and stockings, but when summer came, the fur made her sweat and itch.

No man would fall in love with a monster.

"I plan to seek a mage to break the spell," she said, her tone as hard and flinty as the layer of ice formed over the garden pond. "Attempting to seduce a man is a waste of time. Trust me, Victoire..." She softened her

tone. “It’s time to try something different. I’m not unaware of how you and the others suffer because of my foolishness.”

“Oh no, milady,” Victoire quickly said, shaking her mop of thick auburn hair. She would be nearly sixty by now, were it not for the curse. She didn’t look a day over seventeen. Everyone in the manor was cursed to stay the same age. “‘Tis all the fault of that horrible witch. If I ever see her, I don’t care however powerful she is, I’ll bring that fire poker over her head.”

“You won’t have to do that, because I shall get to her first,” Laurent said. He stood in the doorway, his steward outfit spotless and neatly pressed as usual.

“If he can beat Mother to it,” Flavien added, appearing behind the steward. “She’s named every mouse in the kitchen after the witch—makes it faster for her to kill them.”

Sybil’s lip twitched; Victoire giggled.

“Was there something you needed to tell me?”

“About Prince Gerald,” Laurent said. “Since he destroyed our gate—thirty-seven iron bars, to be exact—it is only fair that we ask him for compensation.”

“And?” Sybil caught a mischievous gleam in Flavien’s eyes.

“Once the prince has regained his strength, he shall chop firewood for us. I have calculated the cost—for the price of the iron bars and the amount of work to replace them, the prince will have to stay here for at least a month and nine days.”

“That’s the most idiotic suggestion I’ve ever heard,” Sybil said contemptuously, as if Laurent were a child. “He’s a prince, not a pauper. He can offer us plenty of gold.”

Laurent coughed. “As a matter of fact, he lost everything he carried when he crossed the river. The laundress reported his pockets are empty. He has nothing to compensate for destroying our gate.”

“He’ll do nothing of the sort,” Sybil snapped. “He can simply send a message to the castle and have someone bring the money. What’ll the queen say if she knew her precious son is being asked to do labor work?”

“The queen hasn’t been of her right mind, and Prince Gerald isn’t the eldest. Besides, he seems to be completely lacking the kind of pomposity and arrogance one might expect from someone of his position. I’m certain he won’t complain.”

“We are not keeping him here, and that’s final,” Sybil said, holding up a clawed hand. The tips of her claws gleamed, and her servants flinched for a second. “Once he’s recovered, send him on his way.”

“Very well, milady.” Laurent bowed his head, but Flavien and Victoire looked disappointed.

“Is there anything special you require for dinner, now that we have a guest?”

“Nothing, as I’m not dining with him. Tell Margot to prepare a dinner tray, but not until an hour later. I have to look up a book in the library.”

Sybil swept out of the room, though not before donning her veil. Just in case she ran into Prince Gerald.

The library was her favorite room in the manor, even before she became cursed. Sybil was known first and foremost for her beauty, but there were also many who knew her for her love of books. Most noblewomen were literate, but few were able to read literature and epic poetry. She had participated in translating King Antoine’s diaries, which were written in the archaic Savon language.

The smell of leather, wood, and paper greeted her when she entered the library. It was her favorite place in the house, her haven of comfort where she could escape into and temporarily forget the sufferings of the curse. Here she could repose, immerse herself in a world long past, laugh and sympathize with her favorite characters. Books possessed a magic that needed no mage to cast.

Sybil headed toward a bookshelf near the window. There was a book containing records of a mage who lived in Masaro, and while it was possible the mage was now long dead, she hoped it might contain a clue to his descendants. A mage was her only hope to break the curse.

She stood with her back to the door, book in hand, facing the window. Snow was swirling outside in great white mists—looked like Prince Gerald had to stay here for a few more days, even though she was adamant to send him packing.

With a sigh, Sybil re-focused on the book. She became engrossed while reading a battle between the mage and a dozen armor-clad knights—so engrossed that she didn’t hear footsteps approach the library until a confused voice said, “This isn’t the dining room.”

An unfamiliar voice. It had to be Gerald. Sybil flung herself behind a shelf and crouched near the carpeted floor. Through the gaps between the

books, she glimpsed Gerald in the doorway, a puzzled expression on his painting-perfect face.

Flavien appeared behind him. “I’m terribly sorry, Your Highness.” His gaze swept through the library; his brow creased. “I’m afraid there has been a misunderstanding. Please come downstairs with me.”

Sybil waited a long moment after the two of them disappeared. Then she rose from her undignified position on the floor. Her claws had raked grooves over the book’s cover—luckily it was made of thick leather and none of the contents were damaged.

Flavien must have purposefully given Gerald directions to the library. Of all the servants, he was the most brazen one.

“I’m going to kill him,” she muttered.

CHAPTER 6

Gerald stared at the feast laid out in front of him. It was rich enough to rival any banquet served at the castle. Truffle-infused onion soup, stewed duck cassoulet, an exquisite soufflé with sliced cheese latticework on top, poached eggs and mushrooms topped with red wine sauce and seasoned with thyme and parsley. No seafood, but it was to be expected in this part of the kingdom, where the sea was several days' travel away.

Traditional Savon cuisine at its very finest.

"We've never entertained a prince here," Flavien said, placing a dish of sliced white bread on the table. Garlic butter was melting on the freshly baked bread, still hot from the oven. "Is the food to your liking, Your Highness?"

"This is miles beyond my expectations," Gerald said. *How many dishes did the cook prepare?* "Not that I'm not grateful, but honestly, there's no need to prepare a feast on my account."

"But it's such an honor," Flavien said. "Trust me, Your Highness, it's an absolute delight to serve you."

Victoire entered the room with another covered tray.

"Please." Gerald held up a hand. "No offense—the cooking is excellent, but this is more than I can take."

"But this is dessert!" Victoire said, as if dessert didn't count as part of the meal. She uncovered the dish and set it among the other courses. "Mama and I made almond cake slathered with coffee buttercream, and here's a bunch of candied orange peel dipped in dark chocolate. You *have* to try some, Your Highness."

Gerald gave an inward sigh. He'd have to eat a smaller portion of the savory dishes if he were to try the desserts.

"Some wine, Your Highness?" Laurent asked, holding up a bottle.

"Thank you, but I'd rather wait until the mistress arrives." The table was long enough to seat a dozen; he felt awkward sitting alone.

Victoire flushed and glanced at Laurent, who shook his head. "She is not feeling well at the moment and would prefer to take dinner in her room."

"Too bad," Flavien said.

Disappointment flashed past Victoire's face, and Gerald found himself feeling the same. He had wanted to thank the mistress of the house for saving his life, and it seemed appropriate that he express it in person. But if she wasn't feeling well, there was nothing he could do. As an elderly widow or old maid, it shouldn't be surprising that she lacked good health. Particularly when the weather was dreadful.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Is there anything I can do? I'll be glad to take a pot of tea, soup...anything that could provide her relief."

Victoire looked amenable to the idea, but Laurent spoke. "It is very kind of you, Your Highness, but my lady has expressed a wish to be left alone."

Gerald recollected what happened before dinner. Flavien had told him the dining room was on the third floor, at the end of the corridor. Most layouts had the dining room on the first floor, but he nevertheless mounted the stairs. He was amazed when the "dining room" turned out to be a huge library—the kind he wouldn't mind getting lost in. But what made it even more surprising was the lady standing by the window.

She was dressed in a gown of rich cream, so she wasn't a servant. She had her back to him, but her upright posture and slender figure suggested she was young, or at least not beyond forty. She had fled once she heard him, her lightning-fast movement supporting the theory that she couldn't be the lady of the manor. Perhaps the daughter, or granddaughter of the mistress? But then, why hadn't the servants mentioned her? And why wasn't she at dinner with him?

Gerald considered briefly asking Laurent and Flavien, but the exchanged glances between them hinted at some secret they were withholding from him. He wouldn't get an honest answer if he pressed

further. He'd wait for a better opportunity to find more about the mysterious lady.

He glanced at the tall, arched windows as he ate. Victoire and her mother were certainly excellent cooks, worthy of Savony's reputation of outstanding cuisine. But any culinary appreciation faded when his quest started to dominate his thoughts.

Snow was still falling; it looked like he had to stay for a few more days. There was nothing he could do anyway, since the compass had fallen into the river. He had yet to receive a message from Freja; perhaps she was too occupied to answer. Creating the countercurse to control hundreds of trolls was no simple task; plus she mentioned about dealing with a witch who had an old feud with the Arksan king.

Gerald swallowed the last piece of cake on his plate. The almond and coffee flavors dissolved in his mouth, sending a delightful warmth to his mind.

"Even the Masaros cannot make a dessert finer than this," he said, and Victoire flushed with pleasure. Masaros were known for their obsession with confectionary and cake.

"Mama'll be delighted; it's her specialty."

Gerald laid the napkin on his plate. It was the most delicious meal he ever had since Princess Iliana's visit. Frankly, he wondered why an outstanding cook like Margot was willing to work in a place as isolated as the de la Roche manor.

The name of de la Roche was faintly familiar. Wait...wasn't that the name of Lady Sybil, the woman who inspired his grandfather to write poetry and build the opera house? But Lady Sybil died before she turned twenty, and there wasn't any record of her marrying and bearing children. Besides, even if she had secretly married, her children would bear the name of her husband. More likely it was a male cousin who inherited the manor.

"Your Highness?" Victoire's voice interrupted his thoughts. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Victoire, please." Laurent sent her a stern look, while at the same time Flavien said, "If His Highness doesn't mind."

Gerald had a feeling what Victoire was going to say, but he nodded. He owed his life to the people in the manor.

"Are you in a courtship?"

Aha. Just as he expected. He would have liked to say yes, but judging from the curious, eager faces that surrounded him, they'd ask follow-up questions as to the identity of the lady, when would the marriage be, etc.

"No."

Victoire and Flavien looked at each other. Flavien rubbed his hands in glee. Gerald braced himself for the next question, which he was certain would be a recommendation for an eligible lady of their acquaintance.

"Pardon for bringing this up, Your Highness," Flavien said, "but when you forced entry into our grounds, you destroyed our gate."

"Thirty-seven bars out of a hundred and twenty," Laurent added with Arksan precision.

Gerald stared. This was not what he expected.

"That gate has stood there since our mistress's father had it constructed eighty years ago."

"Seventy-nine years," Laurent corrected.

"...and while it certainly wasn't as sturdy as before, there is sentimental value in it."

"I do apologize for the wreck I caused," Gerald said, relieved that no eligible maiden was mentioned, though confusion lurked in the back of his mind. Why did Victoire ask the question, if she wasn't interested in introducing a lady to him? "Had it not been out of desperation, I would never have dreamed of cutting down the gate. Once the snow is cleared, I shall write to the castle immediately and send for compensation."

"That won't be necessary," Laurent said curtly. "It is not money we need. However, the snowstorm has left the manor in a rather unfortunate state. I am no longer young and Flavien is unable to work all day. We would be much obliged if you would lend us a hand in clearing the snow."

Gerald nodded. "I was in fact thinking the same thing. I would be more than happy to help—it is the least I can do when you have saved my life and taken me in."

The men broke into relieved smiles.

"Excellent!" Flavien rubbed his hands together. "Suppose we start from the roof? It's well-built, but one can never be too careful."

A maid entered the room, curtsied, and made a gesture at Flavien, indicating that he step out of the dining room. He grinned and bowed at Gerald. "Excuse me for a moment, Your Highness."

When he returned, his cheerful expression had disappeared.

“What was that about?” Victoire said. “Did you flirt with her and she rejected you?”

Privately, Gerald thought Flavien reminded him of the twins—eager to attract women, but their attempts at flirting were disastrous.

“No.” Flavien placed both hands on his head. “Sy...the mistress wanted me to muck out the stables and farm. *All by myself*.”

Laurent’s lip twitched, but all he did was set a sympathetic hand on Flavien’s shoulder before leaving the room.

Gerald cast Victoire a questioning look, but she shrugged. “My brother deserved it.”

Outside, ice-clad fir trees and snow-laden hedges were the only dark colors in an enormous blanket of pure white snow. He wondered how deep the snow was—it might need a bit shoveling or they wouldn’t be able to go outside.

Gerald rose and returned to his room. While the servants’ behavior was courteous, and the request for assistance in snow removal reasonable, he remained puzzled. Again, he thought about the mysterious lady in the library. Were Flavien and Victoire planning to introduce her to him? If that was their intention, after confirming his state as a single man, why didn’t they tell him about the lady, but rather ask him to shovel snow?

Was he ever going to meet the emaciated Lady de la Roche?

CHAPTER 7

Sybil turned a page of *Advanced Charms & Spellmaking* and contemplated. To create a tracking spell, she'd need several magical ingredients and something from the person she wished to track. A hair, a necklace, or even a ducat the person has touched. Kind of similar to an elderly gamekeeper she once knew—when a village child went missing, the gamekeeper would let his dog sniff at the child's clothes and then explore around, using the scent from the fabric. Naturally, the strength of the tracking spell would depend on the object belonging to the person—the longer the person held the object, the more powerful the spell.

But where—how—was she to find an object belonging to a mage?

Seducing Prince Gerald seemed almost easier.

Sybil closed the grimoire with a snap. She couldn't give up hope. It wasn't only she who suffered; her servants also couldn't live a normal life, stuck in perpetual youth or middle-age.

She'd have to order Laurent and Flavien to scout clues about mages. Mages generally didn't want to be found, but they couldn't possibly live in total isolation. They had to wear clothes, exchange ducats, touch things.

A difficult task lay ahead, but it wasn't hopeless. None of the methods sounded simple, but if she didn't try something, she'd be stuck as a beast forever.

Something scraped on the roof above her, followed by a whooshing sound. She turned, just in time to witness through the window a pile of snow plummeting to the ground. The wind caught part of the snow and swirled it through the air, creating a sparkling white mist.

“Your tea, milady.” Victoire appeared in the entrance to the library, carrying a wooden tray. A delicate porcelain teapot, bought from a traveling Lulan merchant, sat on the tray. “Shall I bring it to your room, or would you like to have it here?”

“In my room.” Libraries should be used for reading, not sipping tea. Tea was for the sitting room—she had been taking her meals in her bedroom for days already. In fact, she hadn’t even left the third floor since Gerald ran into her in the library.

“Has the prince gone yet?”

“Laurent’s been making him shovel snow and haul logs from the shed. They’re on the roof now, actually.” Victoire giggled. “You ought see the prince when he’s working, milady. He’s already a dream by just breathing, but when he’s shoveling the snow with his sleeves rolled up, showing muscled arms and wiping his forehead, I thought I was going to pass out.”

“Sleeves rolled up in this weather? Some nerve he has, after nearly freezing to death.”

Victoire stabbed a finger in her direction. “There you go again. Pretending to be indifferent when you really want to see him.”

Sybil drew herself to her full height. She was eighteen, only a year older than Victoire, but there were times she felt the need to act much older.

“Victoire, I have said I won’t subject myself to another humiliation, and I mean it. Do you seriously believe I have any chance with these?” She held out her clawed fingers. “No man of his right mind will propose to a beast.”

“There’s still hope,” Victoire pleaded. “If you don’t want to use the spells we have, wait until we can visit the village and procure more ingredients. We can make a better spell. We’ve been improving; each one is the better than last. Just have a little more patience, milady. Think of how rare it is for a man to wander to this remote part of the forest.”

Sybil pointed at the wardrobe. “I need to change.”

A light shone in Victoire’s blue eyes. “Are you going to get dressed for dinner? Oh, let me do your hair; I can create a perfectly elegant chignon by now. It’s the latest fashion among the ladies. We don’t want the prince seeing you in outdated fashion...”

“I want you to make adjustments to this dress.” Sybil selected her plainest gown—dove gray, with a row of pearl buttons down the front and

white lace cuffs. “Replace the buttons with plain wooden ones, and remove the lace on the cuffs. I don’t want to see an inch of lace on this dress. And get me a worn apron.”

Victoire looked understandably confused. “Why all this trouble, milady?”

“Before the prince leaves, you will address me as Alma. I’m going to play a lady’s maid.”

Victoire’s jaw dropped. “Milady, you cannot—you are not serious...”

“I am.” Sybil raised a hand. “Obey me, now.”

Her maid went to work, though the reluctance in her face was evident. Sybil’s request was ridiculous, after all. But she couldn’t think of how else to make her servants listen to her and let the prince be on his way. She could attempt to seduce him and fail spectacularly, but why waste the effort? Better hide behind the pretense of a servant—besides, it wasn’t as if she was posing as a scullery maid. A lady’s maid was supposed to be genteel and well-mannered anyway. She could pull it off.

Sybil donned her veil and looked into the mirror. The maid’s cap covered her horns, her elbow-length gloves concealed her claws, and the veil left only her silver eyes showing, though the dark fabric dimmed the silver gleam into a more human-looking gray. She looked odd, but not terrifying.

“Carry a message to the prince. Tell him to come to the library tomorrow morning.”

It was time to tell Prince Gerald to leave for good.

CHAPTER 8

Gerald approached the rear entrance of the manor, a sturdy rake in hand. Laurent had asked him to clear the snow from the paths in the garden. It seemed an unnecessary task, as no one strolled in the gardens when there was nothing to see, but he didn't complain.

He looked up at the four-story building. It was a stately house, with sturdy gray stone walls and arched windows, set against the backdrop of a snow-capped mountain. Never did he expect that in the forest of northeast Savony there was a manor like this. He was lucky that it existed when he was caught in the snowstorm. Ninety-nine chances out of a hundred, he would have frozen to death in an uninhabited wilderness.

Gerald put the rake away in the storage room and returned to his room. He washed his hands using the pitcher on the dresser (Victoire kept the pitcher permanently filled) and sat on the bed for a moment.

It had been a week since he arrived at the House of the de la Roches. The servants of higher ranking—Laurent, Flavien, Victoire, Margot—had been nothing but extremely solicitous. Other servants, such as the laundress, footmen, scullery maid, stable boy, rarely talked to him, but when they did, they were polite and respectful.

He had seen everyone in the house except the lady of the manor. When he inquired about her health, Victoire would look guilty and mumble something about how the lady was still recovering, while Laurent and Flavien would exchange glances he couldn't comprehend. It led him to believe that the lady was purposefully avoiding him. Her poor health was merely an excuse.

And yet, if she didn’t want to meet him, her servants seemed keen to make him stay. Margot continued to produce meals exquisite enough for a king. The maids cleaned his room daily until it sparkled. Victoire made him three sets of elaborate outfits from Laurent’s finest clothes—the cut and material on par with anything from the Imperial Wardrobe. As for Laurent and Flavien—while they both treated him with deference, they also seemed keen to keep him occupied with work. In the beginning, Gerald was all too willing to lend a hand in shoveling snow and fetching wood, as it was the least he could do for repaying their kindness, and the snow had to be cleared if he wanted to leave anyway. But he also sensed that Laurent wasn’t keen to get the job done as soon as possible. Too often the steward suggested to him, “Take a break, Your Highness. The rest can wait till tomorrow.”

He should leave. He had spent too much time at the manor. Even if he lost the compass, there was no reason for him to stay. He could return to Savony and help Theo, or he could ask Freja if there was anything that he, as an experienced magic user, could do.

Maybe it was just as well that the Lady de la Roche had finally summoned him.

As he approached the library, he lingered near the entrance for a few seconds. Were he not on a mission, he wouldn’t have minded staying a little longer. Lady de la Roche owned an impressive library—the kind he always dreamed of. The ceiling was as high as two stories, the bookshelves so tall that one needed ladders, the windows wide enough to let plenty of light inside, and a massive fireplace complete with plush sofas created an inviting atmosphere. There was a library in the castle, but it was dark, musty and stuffy, not a pleasant place for reading. Lady de la Roche was evidently a great lover of books, if she was willing to preserve and maintain such a handsome library. As he trod on the polished oak floor laid with crimson rugs, he saw a bookmark peeking from a handsome volume of Montague, one of his favorite authors.

A woman had her back facing him when he entered. Tall and slender—was it the same woman he encountered that day? They seemed the same height. But the other woman had a sheet of glossy raven hair falling down her back, while this one had her hair done in a stiff bun, her head covered in a black cap.

He cleared his throat and spoke. “Lady de la Roche. Please allow me to express my gratitude for your saving my life, as well as the generosity and hospitality you and your servants have shown me.”

“I am not the lady of the house,” the woman said. If he could name a color for her voice, it would be sky blue—crisp, clean, curt. “I serve the Lady de la Roche as her lady’s companion. My name is Alma.”

She turned around, and he froze for a second, not expecting that she was wearing a heavy veil. With a thick bang covering her forehead, only her eyes were revealed. In her drab, gray dress, patched apron, and black veil, her eyes were the only bright spot in a dark mass. They gleamed with a silvery-white light, drawing his attention, but once he gazed at her levelly, she turned away.

“I suffered from a dreadful disease when I was a child,” she said, touching the bottom of her veil. “It left my body blemished with hideous spots, but my...my lady was generous enough to allow me serve her.”

“I see.” This had to be the woman who had fled from him that day. This was why she had absconded, like a bird taking flight from a cat. But though her appearance was formidable, she carried herself like a lady. She didn’t hunch nor stoop, and her accent was refined and cultured. Victoire was courteous and pleasant, but he could tell she was a servant. This Alma, however, exuded the breeding of a gentlewoman. Maybe her family was well off, but later became impoverished, which obliged her to work for a living.

Alma extracted a folded piece of paper from her pocket. “I bear a note from my mistress. She wishes to apologize for the labor Laurent has imposed on you, and for detaining your journey. If you are fully recovered, she will be glad to provide you what you need.”

Here was a surprise. From how the servants had acted, they were eager for him to stay. Gerald took the paper and read the message. It was short but succinct, and basically made the point that he was to go whenever it pleased him. The handwriting was elegant, stylish, the composition belonging to a person who was well read. A sudden desire came over him —a desire to meet this elusive Lady de la Roche.

“Should Laurent or the others ask you to perform any menial tasks, you have only to show them this note,” Alma continued. “They have overstepped their boundaries when they asked you to clear the snow.”

“It’s the least I can do for repaying your hospitality. Truly, the labor was no trouble at all.” Still, Gerald slipped the paper in his pocket. “About the gates—I regret that I lost most of my possessions in the river, but once I can get ahold of a messenger, I’ll write to the castle and return with compensation.”

“That will not be necessary,” Alma said stiffly. “We are not desperate for ducats. You did what you had to survive. I—my mistress does not begrudge you for the gate. She said it was a good chance to replace it anyway. The ironwork was getting rusty.”

“Your mistress is most kind. Is she currently in good health? I should like to thank her properly for saving my life.”

Was that fear he sensed in her eyes? “Oh no, Your Highness. She is...she is an invalid and does not wish to be disturbed. She’s glad that she was able to save you, and wishes the best for your journey.”

He was expecting to be refused, but still the confirmation from Alma did not lessen his disappointment. “A pity.” He gestured at the book lying on the table. “I would have liked to meet another who is a reader of Montague.”

She drew in a deep breath. “You read Montague?”

“He is one of my favorite writers. Though his books were published several decades ago, I find his depictions of human character still relevant today. The work of a truly great artist can hold up to the challenge of time.”

“I agree,” Alma said. He was almost certain she smiled beneath that veil. “His books hold well to multiple re-readings, along with Prewitt and Aramis.”

“Those are my favorites as well,” Gerald said. Here was an unexpected pleasure—his brothers were literate, but none of them cared for books as much as he did. It was the first time he had met someone who not only was an avid reader, but also shared his taste in books. “You are amazingly well-read for a lady’s maid.”

She retreated a step closer to the nearest bookshelf, as if it could shield her from his gaze. “I have read for my mistress for many years, Your Highness. As I said, she is an invalid and requires constant assistance, including her reading pleasure. Through serving her, I have gained a fondness for good literature.”

“That is remarkable. My grandfather’s valet also read to him, but he never came to appreciate literature. Neither did my grandfather, who only read because he wished to impress a lady. Only a genuine interest can be sustained.”

Her veil moved, which meant her lips moved, but no words came out. Then she spoke, her tone clipped and cool. “You had best get ready for departure, Your Highness, if you wish to reach your destination before dusk falls. The nearest town will take hours to reach.”

Gerald didn’t want to leave, especially now that he had found a rare person who shared his interest in books. But he had to remind himself there were other more important things to focus on. Perhaps, once the war on the trolls was over, he could return. He could come bearing a gift as compensation for the destroyed gate, no matter Lady de la Roche’s insisting that he shouldn’t bother.

“Very well.” He made a slight bow. “Please convey my gratitude to your mistress, Alma.”

CHAPTER 9

Sybil returned to her bedroom, her heart beating faster than usual. It must be due to her brisk walk back to the room—she had been confined to the third floor so long that she hadn't got enough exercise. It had nothing to do with Prince Gerald and his flawless beauty. He was the second eldest prince; he probably was already engaged.

She ripped off her veil and faced the mirror. When she was turned into a beast, she had taken a hammer to every mirror she owned, until Laurent procured beauty spells so she could seduce a man and break the curse.

In the mirror, her cheeks seemed flushed, even under her gray, scaly skin. She shouldn't have pretended to be a lady's maid—she had thought it was a safe choice, as a lady's companion was supposed to be more, er, ladylike, but it also made her forget her disguise and act too much like herself.

Gerald was nothing like what she had expected. For one thing, he read books. For another, he shared her taste in books—books ranging from quiet, reflective vignettes to sweeping, exhilarating epic poetry. She hadn't known he was an avid reader. Being far away from the capital, the only thing she had heard of was his beauty, and so she assumed he'd be an empty-headed pretty boy. Handsome, but arrogant. Her beauty had made her proud, too proud, and even when she lived as a beast for more than forty years, she still retained some pride. But Gerald was polite, respectful, down-to-earth.

Sybil sat on a chair beside the window. Soon Gerald would emerge from the stables and leave the manor. She would have liked to know him better, curse or not, but she had done the right thing, she told herself

fiercely. She wondered briefly how he came to the manor—it was so far, so remote. Of the forty years since she was cursed and everyone assumed she was dead, a hundred people had wandered to the manor, and for the last decade, only a dozen. Rumors had spread about a demonic creature living at the foot of the mountain, putting up a human appearance to fool men, with the evil intention of gobbling them up. No doubt the rumors were spread by the hapless victims she failed to seduce.

A figure clad in a rich, bottle-green woolen cloak, astride a dappled gray mare, appeared in the grounds below. Sybil watched as the prince, now a dark speckle against the white snow, disappeared from the (still-broken) gate and gradually vanished from sight.

* * *

AT LUNCH, Sybil looked askance at the feast spread in front of her.

"Margot!" she called.

The cook promptly appeared, still wearing her apron and torque. "Yes, milady?"

"Why did you prepare so much food?" Sybil gestured at the several dishes, complete from appetizers, main courses, to desserts. "I am one person, not an army!"

Margot twisted her fingers on her apron. "Beg pardon, lady. I didn' know the prince was leavin' today, and I cooked more than, well, normal."

"Was he a glutton?"

"No! Oh no, but he..." Two spots of red appeared on Margot's cheeks. "He praised my cookin', eez all. And he's such a nice young man, I didn' mind getting up the feast. But don' worry; we didn' waste the leftovers. I had used some for another—"

"You served him better food than I."

"I'm sorry, milady." Margot hung her head. "'Tis you requested dinner on a tray. If you'd dined wi' him, you'd be havin' the same too."

Sybil groaned. Everyone was under the spell of the perfect Prince Gerald. "Take every dish away except the chicken fricassee and hot chocolate."

A maid, who was cleaning silverware on a side table, came and helped Margot carry the other dishes back to the kitchen. There was a noticeable

droop in her shoulders, and her eyes lacked spark. Clearly, the maid was bemoaning Gerald's departure but hadn't the audacity to chastise Sybil.

Victoire did, however. Just a half hour earlier, when Sybil announced she was going downstairs to dinner, because Gerald was gone and she was sick of eating in her room, the handmaid put her hands on her hips and delivered an earful.

"Why did you send him away even without trying?"

"Why should I try when there's no chance?"

"He acted normal when you were in the library in that stupid maid's garb. In fact, he looked like he was interested in getting to know you."

"You were spying on me?"

"I was passing the library. I couldn't help it if you didn't keep your voices down. And I liked that he didn't flinch or look away when talking to you. You could've given him a chance." Victoire's breaths came out fast; she put a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, milady." She fled the dining room.

Her handmaid rarely dared to chastise her. She must have felt strongly to burst out like this.

But what else could she do? Prince Gerald didn't seem the kind of man who'd propose quickly, even if it were love at first sight. He'd take his time, getting to know the woman until he was absolutely certain, and then pose the question. The beauty spells didn't last more than several hours—a day at most. She'd never be able to get him to propose before he discovered her beastly appearance.

Sybil stabbed her fork into the chicken with unnecessary force and finished her meal in silence. When she was done, she set down her fork and spoon with an audible clink. She rose, tossing the napkin on her plate instead of folding it neatly, as befits a lady.

"I'm going out," she said to the maid and footmen waiting outside the room.

Pulling on a heavy cloak, Sybil went down to the stables. At this moment she preferred the company of horses more than humans.

It wasn't as cold as she expected—the worst of the winter seemed to be over. Sybil looked toward the sky.

In the stables, Bernardin was grooming the horses. Sybil had an especially soft spot for the lad. He was only thirteen when the curse

struck; his parents had been devastated and moved out of the village, abandoning him.

Bernardin tipped his cap at her and muttered, “Lady.”

“Good afternoon,” she said. “Is everything well?”

He nodded.

“Are all the horses in good health?”

“Yes, milady.”

Sybil rested a hand on his shoulder. “You should come to the manor more often, Bernardin. You don’t have to spend most of your time in the stables.”

He lowered his gaze to the ground. Bernardin was always extremely shy, and forty years under the curse hadn’t changed his character.

“Think about it,” Sybil said gently, seeing that he was uncomfortable about her words. “Which horse did the prince take?”

“I gave him Maple. Opal was sick and Sammy was too small for long journeys. Peony would do, but she’s your horse.” Bernardin looked anxious. “Did I do right, Lady?”

“You did fine,” Sybil assured him. Since his parents abandoned him, Bernardin had grown more eager to please, and afraid of getting on the bad side of others. “Have you an apple?”

He produced a shiny green apple from a sack. Sybil thanked him and headed to Peony’s stall. But just when she reached her horse, she heard the sound of horse hooves clop-clopping, and Bernardin’s voice. “Your...Your Highness?”

Gerald was back! Sybil ducked out of the other side of the stables, terrified he’d discover what she looked like. She had her gloves on, but she had taken her veil off to breathe in the fresh air. She dug in her pockets, her heart pounding, and finally, she found it. She had just fastened the veil around her face, when Gerald came in, leading Maple, and Flavien was following close behind.

“The bridge isn’t fixed yet?” Flavien was saying. “How terrible!”

Sybil rolled her eyes. He sounded positively delighted.

“I suppose the weather prevented the villagers from re-building the bridge right away,” Gerald said. “Do you have any idea how soon it’ll be up again?”

“No. Afraid not. Sorry, Your Highness.”

“Is there any other route except for the bridge?”

“The manor is surrounded by mountains, Your Highness.”

“Can one not scale the mountains?”

Flavien emitted a loud gasp. “Don’t even think about it! Have you looked up and seen how much snow there is on top? You’ll freeze to death and we won’t be able to rescue you if you’re stuck up there. Besides, if you go the wrong way, you’ll end up in the desert instead of Arksar.”

She felt sorry for the prince. Flavien might lie sometimes to cover up some frivolous mistake, but this time he was right. There wasn’t any other route except for the bridge. Such was the location of the manor. And yet, a tiny part of her was secretly relieved, no matter how she wanted to deny it.

“But don’t worry,” Flavien said cheerily. “We’re well stocked—got to be prepared for winter—and sometimes Laurent and I go hunting in the mountains. You ever had fresh deer meat roasted on a spit, Your Highness?”

Sybil slipped away as noiselessly as she could. She had gone several paces when a voice called behind her, “Alma!”

She touched the strings attached to the veil, made sure the knots were secure, and turned around. Gerald approached, looking genuinely delighted to see her. Her lips parted involuntarily into a smile that he couldn’t see.

“I came back,” he said. “The villagers haven’t started work on the bridge, so I’m afraid I’ll have to take advantage of your hospitality for a while longer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” *Liar. Even if you’re not going to seduce him, you wouldn’t mind seeing him around.* “You must be terribly disappointed.”

“In the beginning, yes, but now that it’s inevitable—” he shrugged “—it isn’t as bad as I thought. I’m living more comfortably here than in the castle.”

He smiled, and she found herself thinking he could make a weapon out of that smile. People would be distracted, and he could use the distraction to his advantage.

“Since I have to be here for another week or two, would you mind asking your mistress if I can borrow a few books from the library? I’ve been dying to spend more time in there; it’s heaven for a bibliophile.”

“Sure. I mean, I’ll ask her, but I doubt she’ll have any objection.”

“Excellent. And perhaps you can recommend me a few books? Our tastes are similar; I’m sure anything you find favor with will be worth

reading.”

She nodded before she realized what she was doing.

It’s just a few books, she told herself, as she went back to her room and shut the door firmly behind her. *Nothing will come of it.*

CHAPTER 10

Gerald closed his book and laid it on the handsome walnut table next to his bed. The two-tier bookshelf above the table was filled with books he got from the library. Since he had been forced to return to the de la Roche manor, he had been reading to his heart's pleasure. The snow was cleared from the roof and garden paths, the firewood gathered, and besides, Lady de la Roche had ordered Laurent to stop asking him do menial tasks, though Gerald would have been willing to help.

Surprisingly, getting stranded at the manor had turned out to be the most enjoyable period of his life. The library was a repository of treasures, and the books Alma recommended were entertaining and enlightening. He never had much time to read in leisure, or spend time searching and acquiring reading material. Here, he could indulge himself—it was almost as if the manor was created for him. A never-ending pile of books and a personal librarian...what more could he want?

As he looked at the bookshelf, the image of a slender, veiled woman rose in his mind.

Alma.

For the past two weeks, he saw her almost daily. The servants treated him well, eager to fulfill any request he made, but Alma was different. She acted more like a peer, a friend, and though she wasn't falling over her feet to please him, he looked forward to seeing her every day.

Unlike most women, who tended to babble or fawn in his presence, Alma talked to him as if he were a normal person. Moreover, she talked to

him in *his* language—the language that only bibliophiles could understand.

She shared with him an appreciation for Prewitt's underlying satire. She also admired Aramis's magical prose, even if it distracted readers from an otherwise mundane plot. And she read every single book by Montague, even the obscure ones that were difficult to procure in bookstores.

The servants provided him with material comfort, but Alma offered him company that was scintillating and satisfying. Sometimes he chastised himself for feeling a guilty pleasure that the bridge was not ready yet. The longer it took to finish, the longer he could stay at the manor.

A warm, fuzzing sense radiated from the bracelet Freja gave him. The ruby on the center was glowing, signifying there was an oral message for him. He tapped on the ruby, and the sound of Freja's voice came through the gem, a little muffled but audible.

"Prince Gerald. I have received your message. I am sorry to hear of your situation, but it's fortunate you are cared for. Your brothers have not found anything about Urdu so far. Once you are able to leave the place you're stranded in, please contact me."

Gerald lowered his wrist. Disappointment came over him like a wet towel, dampening his good mood. The twins and Julian hadn't made any progress. What if his compass was the one that would lead them to Urdu?

Freja's message pulled him back to reality. No matter how pleasant life at the manor was, he was on a mission. Once the bridge was rebuilt, he had to leave.

"Good morning, Your Highness." Victoire walked into the room, carrying a pot of steaming hot chocolate. Margot made the best hot chocolate he had ever tasted. Rich, dark and creamy, sometimes with hints of cinnamon and spice. Today's hot chocolate smelled of hazelnuts.

She smiled, but the smile appeared strained and forced. Gerald wondered what put a dent in her usually cheery mood.

"Were you talking to yourself? I thought I heard voices."

"A little." Gerald waved at the books lined on the shelf. "I was reciting a passage. The books Alma recommended contain lovely prose."

A spark of interest flared in her eyes. "What do you think about her?"

"I like her very much," he said frankly. Life at the manor was simple, enabling him to act and speak without guile. "She's a lovely, intelligent

woman, but...”

“But what?”

Gerald paused. He could talk to Alma for hours, and yet, often it was she who ended their conversations, excusing herself because she had to attend to Lady de la Roche. He knew she couldn’t have all day to herself, but what frustrated him was her unwillingness to talk about herself. When he asked her about her family, she’d give a short, elusive answer, or change the subject. When he asked her how she liked serving the lady, she’d shaken her head and said it was too mundane to talk about. And when he tentatively asked if he could see her face, she immediately shut up like a clam.

He wanted to know more about her, and her reluctance to open up to him, plus the secluded life in the manor, cemented her in the center of his mind. Who was she, where did she come from, and what was she hiding?

“She seems a little...aloof? Is it because of Lady de la Roche? I understand if the lady would prefer that her maid maintain her distance from a male guest.”

“Oh no!” Victoire cried, holding up both hands. “No, no, not at all—I mean, the lady doesn’t object at all. It’s Alma’s problem. She’s, um, she doesn’t have confidence, because of the veil. Please don’t let it bother you, Your Highness. Keep talking to her, and she’ll come out of her shell.”

Startled at her outburst, Gerald could only nod. “I’ll try.”

“Please do.” Her face flushed pink with embarrassment, Victoire changed the subject. “Today’s laundry day. Can I have the clothes you changed out of last night?”

“Thank you.” Gerald moved toward the wicker basket at the foot of his bed, but she reached it sooner than him. Scooping up the crimson tunic and breeches, she tucked them under her arm.

“Mama’s making your favorite today—spinach and bacon quiche with three kinds of cheese.”

“That would be lovely. Just checking…she isn’t making too much this time?” Last time when Margot baked the quiche, it was large enough to feed ten.

“Oh no. My mistress warned her about food storage, especially when the bridge isn’t fixed yet. But don’t worry! If we run out of food, Laurent and Flavien can go hunting in the mountains.” She smiled, but again it

seemed strained. Usually she bounced into the room, the enamel locket swaying in front of her dress, with a smile like sunshine.

The locket. She wasn't wearing it today.

"Victoire," he began.

"Yes, Your Highness? Anything you need?"

"That locket you used to wear." He drew a finger across his chest. "You aren't wearing it today."

"Oh!" Victoire held up her hands, making a distressed gesture. "I must've misplaced it, that's all. I didn't know you noticed, Your Highness."

"Was it precious to you?" he said gently. "It seems you're not being yourself today."

Emotion flickered through her eyes, but it soon vanished. "'Tisn't anything to worry about," she said brightly. "It'll turn up soon, I know. Now, I'd better go and get your clothes to the laundress—she'll grumble if I turn up late, and laundry takes forever."

When she left, Gerald looked around his room. Victoire came in every day, delivering him breakfast and snacks, sometimes bringing him freshly laundered clothes, sometimes changing the bed sheets and pillows. It was possible that the locket might have dropped somewhere—wedged behind the bed's headboard, for instance. But a thorough search yielded nothing.

He wondered where the locket came from. Was it from a lover? She never mentioned a name and certainly didn't act like she was in love, giddy and excitable. Perhaps it was from her father. He knew, from various conversations between the servants, that Margot was widowed. Most likely Victoire treasured the locket because it was one of the few things left to her by her father.

Gerald picked up the book he finished. It was the second book of a series; he'd go to the library and fetch the third. He could've got the whole series in the beginning, but he was hoping to run into Alma. She seemed to have an ocean-deep reservoir of knowledge and a lifetime of reading. Sometimes it was hard to believe she was a young woman. He didn't know her age, but as a lady's companion, she couldn't be more than twenty-five.

Before he stepped outside into the corridor, a gleam of silver made him pause. The hot chocolate pot sat on the table, and a faint aroma still lurked in the room. Unsure when Victoire would return, he decided to carry the

pot to the kitchens. A few days ago, he discovered that mice would eat anything—indeed, they seemed to like sweets better than cheese.

Slipping the book into a drawstring pouch (one must always take good care of a book), Gerald grabbed the tray and left the room. He tried a new route this time, which he thought might be faster. A few twists and turns, and he should be there.

Passing another staircase, he heard voices. They belonged to Laurent and Margot.

“...don’t think it’s possible,” Laurent was saying. “You cannot rely on him to break the curse.”

Gerald’s ears perked up at the word “curse.” He couldn’t help being sensitive toward the word, considering had he only got out of a nasty, life-threatening hereditary curse a while ago.

“But he seems such a nice lad,” Margot sighed. “The maids are half in love with him already, and even Bernardin blushes when he sees him. A few spells might do, if we can convince her not to give up...”

“Look at it from her perspective,” Laurent said quietly. “She had twenty-eight rejections. For a woman who is used to men fawning over her, her pride has suffered repeatedly. We cannot force her, Margot.”

“Doesn’t hurt to keep hoping,” the cook replied. “He’ll be stuck here until the bridge’s done, and anything can happen before then. From what Victoire’s told me, he’s awfully kind. Polite, too. You don’t see ‘em common in a prince.”

“Polite or not, he’s a man,” Laurent said. “While all men have their preferences, in this case, it’s unrealistic that he’d...” His voice died away.

Did Laurent hear him? Gerald stood absolutely still, releasing his breath as slowly as possible. But no footsteps approached. Then another idea struck him—was Laurent under the influence of a silencing charm?

CHAPTER 11

Sybil shut her book with a snap and laid it on her bedside table. She was re-reading a book called *The Travels of Cyrene*, the first book of a series written by Cyrene, the third son of a wealthy lord. With a limitless supply of money and without duties to perform, he went on a decade-long trip around the world. She didn't admire Cyrene as a person, but she did appreciate his writing. The man had a genius with words and a sharp, biting satire that made the reader laugh. His rich, entertaining descriptions of his travels possessed the magic to transport her to other kingdoms—Arksar, Masaro, Lulan, even the faraway Finsoor islands that lay northwest to Savony. Gerald had admitted he hadn't traveled much but would love to see more of the world. Cyrene's books would satisfy his desire to experience life in other kingdoms.

Someone knocked on her door. By instinct, she grabbed the veil on the table and fastened it around her face.

"Milady?" Victoire's voice traveled through the wood.

Sybil rose and opened the door. Victoire came in with the laundry basket. The first thing Sybil noticed was the lack of a smile—Victoire rarely entered with a moody face. The second thing she noticed was the lack of a locket. Forty-two years ago, the village blacksmith had given Victoire the locket.

Victoire gathered the gown hanging over the back of the chair, and a few other items lying over the bed. "Will that be all, milady?"

"Did you take off your locket for a while?"

A shadow fell over Victoire's face and she looked ready to cry. Alarmed, Sybil placed a gloved hand on her maid's shoulder. "Is it

missing?" she said gently.

Victoire nodded and wiped her face. "I've been lookin' everywhere, but it seems to have vanished."

"Do you remember where you last saw it?"

"In my room. I was mending a tear in the prince's tunic, then Mama called me to lunch. I've been searching and searching, but nothing turned up."

"Did Margot see you wearing the locket when you went to lunch?" Sybil asked, wondering if the locket was accidentally dropped in the kitchens.

"No."

"Ask Laurent to round up all the servants and conduct a thorough search in the house," Sybil said. "Tell him it's my orders."

A tear ran down Victoire's cheek. "Thanks, milady. You're real kind." She bobbed a curtsy and left the room.

For a while, Sybil sat by the window. Memories of four decades ago flashed through her mind. Victoire's fiancé, the village blacksmith, was a man of few words, but had a winsome smile. Victoire had stammered and blushed when going on outings with him, and when the blacksmith came to the manor and asked for Margot's permission to marry her daughter, the glowing happiness on Victoire's face made Sybil think that perhaps she ought to get married as well.

Then the curse struck. Sybil's transformation from beauty to beast had cast a deep gloom over the manor, but no one could tell the blacksmith the truth. Five years later, after Sybil suffered her ninth rejection, Margot advised Victoire to break off the engagement.

"You can't keep making excuses forever, darling. What can you do when he discovers you're not growing older?"

Victoire wept, pleaded, begged, but eventually gave in. Sybil, whose keen hearing as a beast enabled her to overhear them from a floor above, felt like tearing the curtains apart with her clawed hands. Never in her life had she felt so powerless.

It wasn't just Sybil who suffered. Her servants had their own lives, which have been monumentally affected when they had to suffer the consequences of the curse.

Sybil blinked away the memories. She *had* to find a mage to break the curse. She couldn't have her servants living permanently, frozen in time,

in this remote corner of Savony. There was another book on tracking spells in the library; she would look it up and start working. She couldn't seduce Gerald, but she was a decent magic user.

She grabbed *The Travels of Cyrene, Vol. 1*, and went to the library. There, standing between two dusty shelves, was Gerald. She would never admit in front of her servants, but she was secretly pleased to run into him. The rational side of her brain told her to avoid him, but the emotional side wanted to spend more time with him. *He's not going to be interested in you—in a romantic way. There's no danger talking to him.*

"Alma." He greeted her with a dazzling smile. "Can you help me select a book? I can't decide which Montague book I should read—they're all written in the same period."

Sybil crossed the room and glanced at the section he indicated. "Those are his earlier works. Montague was still experimenting with different styles at the time, and I find that those books are more rambling and contain less substance."

"What is that book under your arm?"

She held up *The Travels of Cyrene*. "Actually, I was going to recommend you Cyrene." She told him the merits of the writer, about his witty prose and fascinating descriptions, and Gerald looked interested.

"Then I'll take this." His hand closed around the book, brushing across her fingers. Startled, Sybil let go and retreated a step.

"Let me know what your thoughts are when you finish it."

"I certainly will." He smiled at her. "Discussing books has been my favorite time since I came here."

"It's…" Sybil clapped a hand over her veil. She was almost going to say, *It's my favorite time as well*.

"Were you going to say something?"

"Never mind." She searched for another topic. "The…the weather seems better lately. I wonder if the construction of the bridge has commenced."

"Flavien and I have been taking turns to walk to the bridge every day. So far the villagers haven't started yet." Gerald went to the windows and looked outside. Sybil followed him. It wasn't snowing, but the ground was covered completely in white. "How is Lady de la Roche doing?"

She started, realizing he wasn't referring to her. She was Alma, a lady's companion. "She's all right," she said stiffly. "She…she said that

she wants you to make yourself at home. We seldom have guests, and it is a pleasure to host you."

"I wish I could meet her," he said wistfully. "Is she so ill that she cannot even see me for a few minutes? It is my sincere wish to thank the person who saved my life."

"She…she's an invalid," Sybil said, hoping her tone was steady. Luckily he couldn't see her expression under the veil, or he might have seen she was trying to lie convincingly. "She was once a great beauty, but old age and frail health have turned her into an ugly crone. She'd rather not have you look upon her face."

Gerald frowned. "Whatever she looks like, I have nothing but gratitude for her."

Somewhere downstairs, the lunch bell rang.

"I must go," Sybil said. "You should go downstairs, Your Highness. I expect Margot has outperformed herself again."

"Are you…" Gerald stopped and shook his head. "In that case, I shall not attempt to detain you." He stepped aside, indicating that she go first.

Sybil couldn't help but appreciate his gallantry. She was supposed to be a maid, yet he treated her as if she were a lady. A pang went through her —if only she weren't cursed. Concealed behind this veil, she had no chance of becoming romantically involved with him.

As she passed through the library entrance and into the hall, she stepped on something slippery. Next thing she knew, she was falling forward. Her instinct was not to throw out her arms and brace them on the floor, but rather, both hands went to her veil. She couldn't have it flying off. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Flavien disappearing down the stairs.

The conniving scoundrel. He must be spying on me and Gerald, and decided to plant a slippery spell on the ground to make me trip.

Two strong arms caught her waist and pulled her back against a broad chest. For a second she rested against his body, her hands pressed firmly on her veil. It was secure. Thank the magi.

"I can stand now, thank you."

He released her and stepped back. "Forgive me, Alma, but you were going to trip and…"

"There's nothing to forgive," she said curtly. She should turn around and face him, but she couldn't. Her heart was pounding, her face felt hot,

and she was trying not to think of seconds ago, how warm and comforting his embrace was. “Excuse me; I must attend to my lady now.”

She swept away in the direction of her bedroom at the end of the third-floor corridor, all the while thinking what kind of punishment she should assign to Flavien.

CHAPTER 12

Gerald left his room, carrying books. Outside, the hedges were capped with a layer of snow, like icing on a cake, but no longer completely covered like huge white lumps.

What happened last afternoon replayed in his mind, as vividly as if on stage. It was the first time he had held a woman in his arms—unthinkable for anyone in the kingdom, but reasonable given the strict rules imposed by Theo during the curse. He was embarrassed to admit it, but he had replayed the scenario in his head at least a dozen times since he left the library. Alma's body was soft and warm in his arms. She smelled like paper and roses, making him light-headed and unable to form a coherent thought.

He was sorry that he caused her panic—no, he wasn't. He might be a gentleman, but he wasn't a saint.

Stop reliving the moment, he told himself sternly. *You've only known her for a few weeks. She doesn't even want to be friends.*

The thought made him pause at the foot of the staircase. Would Alma flee if she saw him in the library?

"Looking for Alma?" Flavien said, emerging from a corner. His hair resembled a bird's nest, and he was rubbing his arms with a pained expression.

"Are you all right?" Gerald asked. "You look tired."

Flavien shrugged. "Anyone would be exhausted after mucking the stalls all day."

Lady de la Roche had ordered Flavien to clean out the stables and the farm without any help. It was supposed to be punishment, but whenever

Gerald tried asking the others her reason for inflicting it, they would either evade the question or give some brief, meaningless answer.

“She’s in the library, by the way,” Flavien said. “I guess you’re looking for her.”

“Yes.” It struck him that Alma had never shown herself in the presence of other servants. “But I’m not sure if she wants to see me.”

A guilty look came over Flavien’s face. “Don’t worry, Your Highness. She’s just...shy.”

“Does Lady de la Roche not mind? I’m afraid that my frequent conversations with Alma might have caused her to neglect her duties.”

“Huh?” Flavien coughed, as if he suddenly remembered something. “Naw, the lady doesn’t mind. Anyhow.” A sly look entered his eyes. “Don’t let it bother you. She’s terribly fed up about her looks, and she’s self-conscious about that especially when you’re, well, the best-looking man we’ve ever seen.”

Not that again. Gerald wished he hadn’t lost his spectacles in the snowstorm.

“It doesn’t bother me,” he said carefully. “If you’re certain the lady doesn’t mind...”

“She won’t.” Flavien clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Go and talk to her, Your Highness.”

As he mounted the staircase, the desire to see Alma grew stronger. Rarely did he meet anyone he could discuss literature with. There was a tutor when they were young, but soon, fighting the trolls and producing spells took over most of his time.

His wish was granted. When he reached the third floor’s landing, he spotted her emerging from the room at the end of the corridor. As usual, she was swathed in a plain, gray gown, her hair bound in her cap (she must have copious amounts of hair, judging from the size of her cap), and her heavy dark veil swaying in front of her face.

“Alma!” he called, before she could turn away. “How are you today?”

She flushed—yes, even the little skin she showed took on a pinkish hue. A strong desire to tear away the veil came over him; he quashed it promptly.

“I am very well, thank you,” she said primly. She kept her gaze resolutely fixed on the wall behind him—not on the floor, as some servants were wont to do.

He considered apologizing about what happened yesterday, but decided against it. He had saved her from tripping on her feet, and he would've done it again.

"And how is the Lady de la Roche?"

"She is well too."

"Well enough to come out for some fresh air?" He gestured at a window. "It cannot be good for her health if she stays indoors all the time."

"We keep the windows open," Alma said, folding her arms. "She has all the fresh air she needs. Your concern is appreciated, but my mistress knows how to take care of herself. What are you doing here, Your Highness? Another trip to the library?"

He held up *The Travels of Cyrene*. "I finished it this morning."

She barely glanced at the cover. "No doubt it is a fascinating read for you. I'm surprised you haven't finished it earlier."

"Fascinating, I admit, but I am in no hurry to finish the entire series. The descriptions are interesting, as I have not been able to travel around the continent, but I find the main character's behavior unappealing."

"Many of the women Cyrene encountered found him appealing enough."

"The number of women he seduced is immaterial." Gerald folded his arms, mimicking her movements. "What I dislike about him is his regard for women. That for a woman, her appearance is first and foremost, and whatever accomplishments she has are useless if she isn't good-looking."

Her head tilted slightly. Her neck was slender like a swan's, which suited her tall, graceful figure. Too bad she had a scarf wound around her neck. Perhaps the disease she suffered had left marks on her neck as well.

"It is a common belief that men have."

"Not all men," he said. "I assume you have not met many men, in this far end of the forest and at the foot of the mountains. Do not let the behavior of a group represent the minds of a whole."

She flushed again. "I have met enough to prove that Cyrene's statement is irrefutable."

"I will not deny that many men share his views. But *I* do not agree with him." Gerald looked at her straight in the eye. "I was born with this face that everyone finds attractive. Yet I have done nothing. I value what is achieved through merit, not given at birth."

“Easily said.” She gave a bitter laugh.

“I have met a fair number of beautiful women,” he said. Something in him goaded him to keep arguing with her. “But they are content to idle away their time; they do not care about anything except making themselves look desirable. I am unable to carry a conversation with them for more than five minutes.” *Most of the time they giggle and stare at my face*, he would have added. *As if I were a rare animal put on display.* “I would far prefer the company of a woman who can converse in a wide variety of topics, in an intelligent and engaging manner.”

“I assume you have not met many women,” she said, mimicking his tone. “There are women who are both beautiful and accomplished.”

“Yes, but for me, the mind comes before the looks. Whereas Cyrene emphasizes looks over the mind.”

“Wait until you...”

Alma’s gaze fell on something behind him. Gerald turned around. Victoire was carrying a tray; a large silver dish, covered, and a chocolate pot sat on the smooth wooden surface. He was so focused on arguing with Alma that he didn’t even hear Victoire come up the stairs.

“I’m sorry,” Victoire said, her eyes wide. “I didn’t mean to...if I’d known His Highness were here...”

“Thank you, Victoire,” Alma said curtly. “No need to apologize. I’ll carry this to her lady; you may return in an hour to collect the tray.” She glanced at Gerald. “I believe this means that lunch is ready for you too. You may as well go to the dining room.”

“Pardon me,” Gerald blurted. “Will you join me?”

The spoon clanked against the chocolate pot as she jolted the tray. “Join you?”

“For lunch, I mean. If her ladyship can spare you, and if you don’t mind. I’d hate to halt our conversation so abruptly.”

“She won’t have any objections,” Victoire said quickly. “I can wait on her.”

Alma glared at the other woman—even though she was veiled, Gerald was certain the narrowing of her eyes meant that she was glaring. “You have work to do, Victoire. I will attend to her ladyship.”

“But...”

Alma turned swiftly and headed to the room in the end of the corridor. Presumably, that was where Lady de la Roche resided. She opened the

door, just wide enough for herself to squeeze through, and the door shut with an audible thud that echoed through the hallway.

“Your Highness.” Victoire sounded nervous. “I’m so sorry—she, Alma, she can be hard to manage at times. Are you terribly angry?”

“I’m fine,” he assured her. “Alma is rather self-conscious about her looks. I cannot blame her for arguing with me.”

“You are too kind, Your Highness.”

“It’s a pity that she had to leave. I was hoping to convince her that she ought not mind how she looks. I enjoy her company.”

Victoire gasped. “Your Highness, you don’t mind she is disfigured?”

“Whatever blemishes she has, they have not impacted her mind.” Gerald searched for the bookshelf where *The Travels of Cyrene* was located. He put the book into the shelf. “I have enjoyed discussing books with her.”

“But you were arguing.”

“Argument does not have to be unpleasant. It can be stimulating. Although, regarding what we discussed today—” he rested a hand on the shelf “—she was too heavily influenced by her prejudices to offer a more compelling response. But still, I look forward to our next conversation.”

Excitement shone in Victoire’s eyes. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear that,” she exclaimed. “I thought you might be offended when she isn’t being nice, but you’re just perfect.”

As Gerald descended the stairs, he reflected on the past several encounters he had with Alma. All other servants were tripping on their feet to help him. Alma’s behavior puzzled him. And yet...he found himself inexplicably drawn to her. She may be wearing a veil, she may be acting distant, but he found that he couldn’t stop talking when he was in her company.

And then, out of nowhere, he remembered Laurent’s conversation with Margot under the stairway. He had mentioned a curse. Considering Alma’s reluctance to talk about herself, was it *Alma* they were talking about?

CHAPTER 13

Seven lodestones, a pigeon's tail feather, three sprigs of mint.

Sybil stirred the pot-sized cauldron, which was brimming with a silvery liquid. Lodestones glowed on the bottom of the cauldron. Counterwise, three times, then clockwise twice. Next to the cauldron was a wooden bowl that held a pigeon's tail feather. Once the liquid started boiling, she was to add the tail feather and stir a dozen times. She still lacked the catalyst—an object that belonged to the mage she wanted to track—but it didn't have to be added to the mixture straight away. Since she had nothing else to do, she might as well start practicing the spell.

Her forehead beaded with sweat. Why was the tracking spell so complicated? Granted, she was a Savon and Savons were inept at spell-making, but she had spent decades studying magic. She ought to be at least as competent as a normal Arksan.

Steam started to rise from the cauldron as she carefully stirred. At least it wasn't as bad as when she created her first beauty spell. It turned her skin *green*, her eyes yellow, and her face was elongated like a horse's. She resembled a dragoness in the mythology books she owned. When she looked into the mirror, she half expected that she'd emit fire if she opened her mouth. Victoire had to tell the guest that Lady Sybil de la Roche was laid up with a terrible cold.

Gerald's voice echoed in her mind. *For me, the mind comes before the looks.*

Fool, she thought vehemently. He had no idea what it was like to be truly hideous. But she had to admit grudgingly that for a prince with

dazzling beauty, he was remarkably humble. He didn't let his appearance affect his character—something she had been criticized for. When she was the most beautiful lady at court, there were a few rejected suitors who called her a stuck-up wench.

The gurgling sound from the liquid seized her attention. With a sinking heart, she realized she hadn't kept track of how many times she stirred. Snatching the wooden bowl, she emptied the chopped pieces of feather into the cauldron. She stirred the required dozen times, carefully, steadily, but the liquid turned into a nasty shade of green, tinged with yellow. The grimoire said it should be transparent by now.

Sybil flung the ladle away; it landed with a clatter on the floor. The spell was ruined.

For a moment she braced her hands on the table, breathing heavily. Producing a tracking spell was only the beginning. Finding the mage would be another challenge. Since everyone wanted mages to help them with their problems, most mages preferred to conceal their identities. Even if she found a mage, he or she might not be willing to help.

But the other option—seducing Gerald—was unthinkable.

Sybil called for Victoire. Her maid arrived promptly with a contrived smile. She had been in a pensive mood since she lost her locket.

"I need help."

She brightened. "Are you *finally* going to dine with the prince?"

"I meant help with spell-making, not fashion." Sybil waved a hand behind her. Green-tinted bubbles were rising in the air, though she had already vanquished the fire burning underneath the cauldron. "Where's Laurent?"

"He's out fixing the gate with Mama."

"Not with Flavien, or any of the boys?"

Victoire shrugged. "Mama insisted on going with him. She said she was all hot and bothered working in the kitchen and needed the fresh air."

Sybil went to the window. There was her steward, nailing a piece of wood while Margot sorted through a pile of wooden boards. The hole Gerald created was large enough for pesky animals to slip through. Until they could cross the bridge and find a blacksmith, the best they could do was patch up the gate in this rudimentary way.

Her heart softened. It wasn't spoken nor acknowledged, but everyone in the manor knew that Laurent and Margot were attracted to each other.

But neither dared to act on their desire. In the unlikely, but not impossible chance, that Margot were to bear a child (she was forty-one), they wouldn't be able to raise the child in the curse-struck manor. What if the child grew up, while his or her parents remained permanently middle-aged?

"Why not ask the prince to help you?" Victoire offered. "He seems a clever fellow, and he's well read."

Absolutely not. In fact, since their conversation about Cyrene, Sybil had avoided the library altogether. If she sensed him nearby, she'd head in the opposite direction. When he argued that looks didn't matter, it stirred hope in her heart, but once she returned to her room, cold rationality told her not to be foolish. A man might love a woman who was plain or even unattractive, but he couldn't love a beast.

"Tell Laurent to come to the lab when he's done with the gate," Sybil said. "I'm going down to the greenhouse."

* * *

THE GREENHOUSE WAS LOCATED on an adjacent room jutting out from the west wing. It wasn't large, but it was well-maintained. Part of Laurent's duty was to check on the plants and supervise the gardener. Despite the chilly temperature outside, the greenhouse was warm. A heating spell, replenished and replaced year-long, kept the plants and herbs in a perennial state of spring. Most of the plants had to do with spell-making. Even the roses—or rather, *rosa rubiginosa*, to be exact—were excellent containers for sleeping charms. There were times that Sybil was depressed and restless. A sleeping charm would keep her mind from dwelling on the terrifying prospect that she'd be doomed to live as a beast forever.

She looked for the box of mint leaves. One of the ingredients for the tracking spell included a sprig of mint. As she was familiar with the layout of the greenhouse, it didn't take long before she spotted the gray-green leaves, a few of them more blue-ish than green, spread over the box. The scent was strong.

Sybil plucked a few sprigs, put them in a cotton bag, and tucked the bag into her pocket. She paused for a moment before returning to the house. Her second favorite place in the manor, after the library, was the

greenhouse. Even if the plants were meant for spell-making, she enjoyed the verdant sight and the lightly scented air. Reading stimulated her mind, while a stroll in the greenhouse granted her peace.

This time, she thought. This time she'd succeed in the tracking spell. There was still the final, vital ingredient, but that could wait until…

Someone opened the door and headed in her direction. Preoccupied with her thoughts, she didn't see him until she nearly ran into a solid, hard-muscled chest.

The very person she wanted to avoid.

"Steady there," Gerald said gently. He set his hands on her shoulders, preventing her from crashing into him. "Afternoon, Alma."

She jerked away as if he were a marauding bear and put her hands to her veil. Thank the magi, it was secure. There was a flash of hurt in his eyes, but she couldn't regret springing away from him. Falling for him would only lead to heartbreak.

"What are you doing here?"

"Flavien saw me reading and suggested that I get up and stretch my limbs. He recommended this place." He smiled. "I'm glad that I took his advice."

Sybil had half a mind to tell him stop smiling. That smile of his was breaking down her wall of resolve.

"You see, I began a new book today—*The Life and Lies of Master Viggo*—and thought the mindset and actions of the hero most interesting. I'm curious of your opinion."

She must leave. Just staring at him was making her mouth dry. He was the first man she had felt a genuine connection to, and she knew the more time she spent with him, the more likely she would lose her heart. The touch from his hands burned on her shoulders, and the masculine scent from his body made her thoughts jumbled.

"I can't talk to you right now," she managed, rather lamely. "My mistress needs me."

"When will you have free time?"

"I don't know. It...it depends."

"Alma." He was frowning. "Allow me to be frank—do you dislike my company?"

She stared at him, unable to answer the question. To say yes would be rude, not to mention it was a lie. But to say no—he'd keep on looking for

her, wanting to know her better.

“Recently, you’ve been avoiding me on purpose.”

Sybil gave herself a mental shake. “That is untrue,” she said shortly. “Pardon me, Your Highness, but I have other duties that demand my attention.”

She stepped sideways and headed to the door, not daring to look back. She was being unfair to him. But she also knew that if she allowed herself get close to him, the heartbreak that followed his rejection would hurt her deeply, far more than any of the twenty-eight rejections she had.

CHAPTER 14

The greenhouse was utterly quiet as Gerald gazed in the direction where Alma disappeared. He had been hoping to run into her, to talk to her, but for some reason she chose to avoid him, just when he had grown used to having her around. The other servants treated him well, but none offered the delightful sparring of words that Alma could give. None had read so extensively as she. A pity, because he would have liked a new friend. He had eleven brothers that he'd trust with his life, but it would also be nice to have someone outside his immediate family. Why didn't they have someone like her in the castle?

The curse. Perhaps it had something to do with Alma's decision to avoid him. Maybe something harmful would befall him if he stayed longer in her presence, like a sleeping charm contained in a briar rose. But Laurent was also cursed, and the steward made no attempt to keep away from him.

Gerald returned to the main building. It was chilly when he got up in the morning, but the temperature had gone up since. The snowstorm he experienced weeks earlier was probably the worst of the winter season; from now on the temperature should be on a steady, short increase. The back of his neck was damp already.

He went to his room. Time to change out of the heavy cashmere tunic and put on something lighter. His wardrobe was filled with tunics, doublets, surcoats. Somehow Victoire had managed to gather a large amount of items from the male servants and adjust them according to his

size. He had an even bigger supply of clothes than what he owned in the castle.

As his hand drifted over a woolen cloak, something hard and metallic caught his eye. A large enamel locket, snagged between the folds of the cloak and the tunic piled beneath it.

Was this the locket that Victoire lost?

Deftly he untangled the chain from the snarls of wool, and lifted the locket up to eye level. Yes, it looked exactly like the one she usually wore. The chain and heart were old and worn; the clasp was rusty and broken, accounting for the reason it fell off. On the back of the locket was engraved the words, tiny, but readable:

To darling V, with love. Yours, D.

And on the bottom was carved: *327 A.*

The capital A stood for King Antoine, if he wasn't wrong. And if his calculations were correct—after all, he was better at math than the typical Savon—this locket had existed at least forty-two years from now. And yet Victoire didn't look a day older than twenty.

Questions fluttered through his head. If this locket belonged to Victoire, why was it dated so long ago?

"Your Highness!" Victoire happened to enter the room at that very moment, holding a duster and pan. "What's that in your hand? Oh! You found it! Where?"

Gerald explained. Her hand flew to her mouth. "It must have got caught in the wool when I was putting away your clothes." She slapped a palm over her forehead. "The clasp must've broke and I never noticed."

Relief flooded through her face. She tucked the locket into her pocket, carefully, but not before caressing the face of the locket.

"I'm glad that it was found," Gerald said. Then, because he couldn't help it, he added, "Whoever gave you that locket must have been very dear to you. Was it from an admirer?"

Victoire flinched, as if he had struck her, but then donned a bright smile. "It's from my grandmother. My grandfather gave it to her many years ago, she passed it to my mother, and she passed it to me. That's why I treasure it so much."

It was a plausible explanation, yet Victoire's gaze darted around, not daring to look at him in the eye, and she was talking faster than usual. Gerald may have surrounded himself with books, but he had eleven

brothers. He had learned to observe and tell when someone was lying. And so far, she displayed the common characteristics of a liar.

"Your grandmother's first name also starts with a V?"

"Oh yes, she was called Va—Vic—Victoria." Victoire slipped the locket into her apron pocket. "Thank you so much, Your Highness, for finding it and returning it to me. Is there something else you need?"

The truth, he thought. But all he said was, "I presume it's warm enough to take a walk outside?"

"Sure! Laurent and Mama just came in. They've been outside for a while. Laurent's been fixing the gate, so you can certainly stroll around the gardens. There ain't a snowstorm, that's for certain."

Gerald's heart lightened. "In that case, I'll be heading out."

"Don't go too far!" And she left the room, clearly eager to get away from him. It was rare that a girl (apart from Alma) didn't want to talk to him, which made him even more certain that Victoire was hiding something.

* * *

GERALD'S BOOTS crunched on the ground as he headed to the bridge. Although the weather was getting milder, the bridge was pretty much the same as he left it. One half jutted from the river bank, while the other half was gone, washed away by the icy current.

A man was fishing on the other side. He looked up when Gerald appeared.

Gerald cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered. "Any idea when the bridge will be done?"

The villager shrugged. "Some of our houses were snowed in," he yelled. "We've only just finished patching 'em up."

Disappointment, mingled with a surprising sense of relief, tugged on his heart. Gerald gave the villager a wave and headed back.

Looked like he'd be staying at the manor for a few more weeks.

You shouldn't be relieved, he told himself.

To be honest, at this point, without the enchanted compass, he was more interested in discovering the curse on the manor. And now he had ample time to find more about it. Not to mention that he was hoping the

extra time would enable him to see more of Alma, even though she preferred to keep her distance.

His long, quick strides soon brought him back to the manor. He barely paused to shake off the snow on his boots in the parlor. Nodding briefly at the servants who greeted him, Gerald went up to the library.

There were thousands of books, but by now, Gerald had a good idea about how the books were arranged. He hunted through the sections, climbed the ladders to the second floor, searched in nooks and crannies, and finally found what he was looking for.

A shelf filled with books on magic.

Gerald pulled down book after book, flipping through the pages, checking the tables of contents. Several contained spells he had never heard of, such as a complicated spell that could create several identical illusions of a weapon, so the enemy would have trouble figuring out which was the real attack. If only he had found this book earlier, they would have had an easier time fighting the trolls.

Curses, Hexes, and Jinxes: An Introduction to the Dark Arts. Anticipation surged through him as he turned the pages. There was a curse manifested through poison that could make somebody fall asleep and wouldn't age until true love's kiss broke the curse.

Could Victoire be under a similar curse? Even though Victoire told him the locket was passed down from her grandparents, he had a strong suspicion that she wasn't telling the truth. If the locket was from a lover forty-two years ago, the only explanation was that she was under a curse that prevented her from aging. But if only true love's kiss was required, why didn't her lover kiss her and break the curse?

"What are you doing here?" A voice as cold as ice.

Alma was standing in the entrance of the library. She approached him; Gerald shoved the book back to the shelf, unsure how she'd react if she discovered he was looking up curses, but it was too late. She saw his hand brush over a spine marked *Advanced Spellmaking, Vol. 2,* and her eyes grew wide. "Are you interested in magic?"

Through the veil, he couldn't see her expression, but her tone didn't seem rebuking.

"I'm a magic user," he admitted. "I've been dabbling in magic since I was a child."

"But you're a Savon."

“I’m afraid I belong in the minority who are able to produce a competent spell.”

She glanced away for a moment. “Did you say you’ve been studying magic since childhood?”

“For twenty years.”

“For that long?”

“I was a child when I started poring over spell books. I’m twenty-five now.”

She took a step forward, the nearest she’d come to him apart from that accidental stumble in the greenhouse. “Can you do a tracking spell?”

“Of course,” he said. Her fingers gripped his arm—rather painfully. For a young woman, she was abnormally strong. “I created one a few months ago, in fact.” He was referring to the tracking spell they used to ambush Princess Iliana and alert Freja.

“Teach me.” It was half request, half plea. “Please.”

Part of him felt smug. This difficult woman, who had been cold and reserved, was begging him to teach her magic. Just hours ago she shrank away from him, as if his presence was poison. And now she needed him. Magic was complicated, requiring precision, accuracy, effort. She’d have to spend time with him, whether she wanted or not.

What was the reason that made her overcome her initial decision to keep away from him? He swallowed the question, knowing this was not the time.

“Gladly.” He looked into her eyes. “When do we start?”

CHAPTER 15

Whoever created humans was unfair, Sybil thought with slight vehemence.

Prince Gerald stood in her "working room," a room adjunct to the library, where she engaged in spell-making. He had taken off the cashmere sweater Margot knitted for him, as the heat from the cauldron made the room as warm as spring, and was wearing a simple long-sleeved shirt, the first two buttons undone. He was stirring the cauldron, his movements steady and precise. He knew exactly when the ladle came to a full circle, when it was time to change directions of the stirring, and when to add the next ingredient, all without glancing at the grimoire.

Handsome, clever, and from how Flavien praised his ability to shovel snow, he had to be strong as well. Was there anything he wasn't good at?

"How did you become adept at spell-making?" she asked.

He continued to stir without looking at her. "I practiced whenever I could. I'd get my hands on every grimoire I could find, I'd buy the ingredients needed, and I'd spend all day in my room if that's what it took."

"What about your brothers? Are they also as good at spells as you are?"

"Only I," he said with a shrug. "My older brother, Theo, is too impatient to sit down and figure out the workings of a complicated spell, and the same goes for the others. But I've always been of the opinion that a Savon can be proficient in spell-making. We aren't known for being punctual, nor invested in engineering. A Savon is typically more

emotional and intuitive than an Arksan. But if given the occasion, a Savon can also cultivate these qualities. I know a poor shoe cobbler who also sold dresses. Because she had to scrimp and save, as well as convince buyers to purchase the dresses, she had become well versed in numbers."

Sybil understood. She wasn't good at spells in the beginning either, but she had spent decades learning how to create beauty spells that concealed her real face. She was confident that she could make a decent spell on par with any Arksan.

But glancing at Gerald, she couldn't understand why he'd be compelled to do the same. Why this unusual, unnecessary passion for magic? As a prince, he could simply buy ready-made spells from Arksar. He didn't have to spend all day cooped up in a hot, stuffy room, trying to create something that could be easily purchased.

"Why are you so determined to master spell-making?"

His hand shook, and the ladle clanged against the cauldron. Surprised, Sybil stared at him. His features contorted for a second, but then he smoothed his expression into a bland smile.

"Do you believe in trolls?"

Sybil's first instinct was to say no, but then she was cursed by a witch.

"I've read a few books on them," she admitted. "I wasn't quite sure whether to believe the author or not, but I suppose it isn't impossible."

"That's why I came here." The knuckles of his hand turned white. "I wanted to seek a mage."

This time it was her turn to freeze. "A...mage?"

"Yes. Someone who possesses inherent magic, if our definitions are the same."

"But...why?" She remembered what he said earlier, and involuntarily came closer to him. "Because you need a mage to help you, er, fight off trolls?"

He shrugged. "Basically, yes."

Questions flashed through her mind. Looking at him, serene and calm, even with a hint of vulnerability (after all, his beauty was on the feminine side), she couldn't imagine how he got mixed up with trolls. And where did the trolls come from, anyway? She should've heard of them if they existed—they were supposed to be huge and single-minded. Difficult to keep out of sight, unlike a mage.

“I came here with the aid of an enchanted compass,” he said. “But it was lost in the river. The bridge collapsed when I was crossing the bridge in the storm. I managed to climb up the side of the bank, but everything I owned, from my horse to luggage, had fallen into the river.”

“I’m sorry.” The words were also for herself. Just a moment ago she had a tantalizing vision—she’d plead help from the mage Gerald was seeking, and then her curse would be broken, too.

“It’s all right,” Gerald said. “It could’ve been worse. I would have been dead if your mistress hadn’t found me.”

He caught up the ladle, held it to his nose, and his face fell.

“I’m dreadfully sorry, but I’m afraid the spell is ruined. We’ll have to start over again.”

Sybil helped him pour the now-useless liquid into a large pail. Any liquid spilled on the floor would be a pain to clean up. Once they finished, he brought the basin and she poured water on his hands. He rinsed twice and paused. “One thing more. I am sorry that the compass is lost, but on the other hand, I’m glad that I’ve come here. I’m glad to have met you.”

Her heart began to flutter. *He’s only saying that because we saved his life.* And yet, the look in his eyes seemed to convey more than mere gratitude.

“Alma,” he said quietly. “I know it’s probably too much to ask you of this, but I’d dearly love to—”

She should step away from him, but she couldn’t. His eyes held her in place, making her want to lean closer, and...

Just at that moment, Victoire came in. She stood dumbfounded at the two of them—Sybil was close enough that Gerald could place his hands on her shoulders. Reading the shock in her maid’s eyes, Sybil drew away, but not before catching the slight droop in Gerald’s shoulders as he turned and faced the entrance.

“What is it, Victoire?” She did her best to keep herself from sounding irritated.

Victoire clenched the folds on her apron. “Laurent was attacked by a wolf when he went hunting this morning. Flavien tried to save him, but he got injured as well.”

CHAPTER 16

Fear, like an icy mist, engulfed her. For a moment Sybil was speechless. Since the curse prevented them from aging, she seldom had to worry about her servants' health, only of their suffering from living permanently. "Are their injuries serious?"

"Laurent's got a nasty wound on his leg and arm, where the wolf tried to bite 'em off. Flavien twisted his ankle when he tried to carry Laurent to the horse."

"I'll go and see them," Sybil said, feeling that she couldn't relax until she did so. "Where are they?"

"First floor. In the sitting room."

Sybil hurried down the stairs. Laurent was lying across a chaise, the material on his left leg and right arm torn and bloody. Flavien sat on a chair across him, one foot propped on a low stool. Margot was crouching near her son, bandaging his leg while Laurent gave instructions. A basin of blood-soaked water sat on the floor.

"Mi…Alma!" Flavien was the first to see her approach; he was the only one facing her. "Don't you worry; we're big, grown men and will be all right in a few days."

"But we can't hunt." Laurent let out a hiss when Margot pressed a damp rag on his arm's wound.

Sybil frowned. "How did you two get attacked by wolves?"

"It's Laurent's fault," Flavien said, earning a glare from the steward. "He shot a deer and didn't notice there was a wolf lurking nearby. When he noticed, it was too late. And to think he comes from Arksar."

“I’ve been living in Savony for sev—thirty years,” Laurent said. “And besides, Arksans are known for being precise, not being alert to danger.”

“Anyway.” Flavien looked down on the ground. “I am so sorry that we failed to bring any game back with us, except for one measly little rabbit. I’m afraid we won’t have meat until our injuries heal, or when the bridge is fixed. Whichever comes first.”

“I’ll hunt.”

Everyone looked toward Sybil, but only Gerald’s gaze was filled with wonder.

“You can hunt?”

For a moment she regretted saying it. It wasn’t unusual for a lady’s companion to be able to read, but to be able to hunt as well? Sooner or later, Gerald would discover her disguise. But she couldn’t take back her words.

“I learned how to hunt when I was bored. My mistress told me it was unhealthy to keep my nose buried in a book all the time.” That was partly the truth. Her mother had chided her for staying indoors too much, although she didn’t encourage Sybil to go hunting. Riding and walking, however, were perfectly acceptable for a knight’s daughter.

A year after the curse struck, Sybil thought she’d go stark, raving mad. She foresaw her future—an indefinite existence living with a beastly appearance. So when one day Laurent announced he was going hunting, Sybil decided to accompany him. Riding furiously and letting her arrows fly through the air gave her a chance to vent her frustration and despair. She found that when she became a beast, her senses were heightened, her eyesight was sharper, and she had more strength in her limbs. There was at least one benefit of turning into a beast. She had gone from a helpless maiden to a capable hunter.

“But mi...Alma,” Flavien said. “It’s cold out there, it’s dangerous, and you haven’t hunted for some time.” He sent a meaningful look in Gerald’s direction.

“I can go,” the prince offered.

“You must be an accomplished hunter, Your Highness.” Victoire gazed at him with unmistakable admiration. Sybil had a sudden urge to wipe that look of adoration off her maid’s face.

“I admit I have not much experience in chasing and shooting game, but I have spent many years in combat training. I can fight several men

unarmed.”

Now this wasn’t what Sybil expected. Gerald didn’t look like a weakling, but his gentle character and fondness of books didn’t make him appear like a warrior either. But now that he revealed he had combat training, she remembered that every time he climbed the stairs to the third floor, he never slowed down, nor panted. He didn’t have a hulking, muscular build, but his body was lithe and lean, like a mountain cat.

Stop fawning over him like a naive young girl, she scolded herself. *Focus on what’s important.*

“Combat is very different from hunting,” Sybil said, glad that her tone came out crisp and curt. “You are not wrestling with another man. You have to possess accuracy as well as strength to take down a creature from afar.”

“You don’t have to do this, Alma,” Flavien said. “We have vegetables in the pantry.”

Sybil looked toward her cook. “Margot, how much food have we left in the pantry?”

Margot cast a nervous glance in Laurent’s direction. “Enough for a week, mi...Alma. But with the addition of His Highness here, maybe...five days?”

Gerald stood up. “I can hunt. Just show me which way to go.”

Reluctantly, she nodded. “Victoire, find something His Highness can wear for hunting. Where did you put my bow and quiver?”

“In the storage room. I’ll bring them to you right away.”

“I’ll get them myself,” Sybil said. She was realizing that she was acting more like a master than servant, and Gerald was already looking suspicious when he learned she could hunt. “We’ll be back before dark.”

“But we don’t want you to exert yourself,” Flavien was protesting again.

“Shut up,” Sybil said abruptly. “If you and Laurent weren’t stupid enough to get attacked by a wolf, I wouldn’t have to go. We can’t survive on potatoes all day, except Bernardin. He’s happy as long as he has enough to eat,” she added for Gerald’s benefit.

Sybil swept out of the room. She looked back for a second, just to see if her servants were following her instructions, and she saw Flavien exchange a gleeful glance with Laurent.

That scoundrel, she thought, but then she got vexed at herself. She had a suspicion that Flavien, Laurent, and Margot had used this chance to make her go hunting with Gerald. Maybe Flavien wasn't even injured.

We need the food, anyway. It's just bagging enough game so we won't starve.

* * *

"THIS IS *SO* EXCITING," Victoire said, excitement shining in her face as she pulled Sybil's hair into a tight bun. "You're going hunting with the prince! He'll protect you."

Sybil held up her clawed hands. "I think he is more likely to need protection."

"And I still say don't give up hope." Victoire handed her a new veil—the one she had needed to be washed. "He isn't like the other men you entertained. He seems really interested in you; I've seen how he looked when he was going to the library. You've been wearing this veil all this time, yet he acts like it doesn't exist."

"That is because he hasn't seen me without it." Sybil fastened the veil. "The veil prevents him from seeing my face. It offers intrigue. Once it's off and he sees my face, he will no longer think that looks don't matter."

"You can't know for sure, milady."

Sybil slung the quiver over her shoulder. "I'll be back before dark."

* * *

HUNTING in the winter had advantages. There were no insects buzzing around while she waited, no water and mud that her horse would tread into, and the lack of foliage made it easier to see game.

Today there was an additional advantage—hunting with the maddeningly perfect Prince Gerald. She tried not to sneak a peek at his side profile as he rode beside her. Indoors, while he turned pages and sipped hot chocolate with her in front of the roaring fireplace, he was charming in a bookish, scholarly manner. Outdoors, with his hair whipping in the wind and his hands guiding the horse with skill and deftness, he

appeared like an ethereal woodland creature, belonging to another world that resembled paradise, all beauty and fair.

She couldn't think about him that way. If she let her guard down, she'd only end up being miserable. She had been hurt and humiliated so many times, she didn't want to suffer once more, when there was no chance of him liking her back. Well, he *might* like her, but falling in love and asking for her hand in marriage? Impossible.

"Aren't we going to set any traps?" Gerald said.

Sybil slowed her horse into a trot. "There isn't enough time. We have to catch some game right now. Traps can be set tomorrow morning."

He nodded, looking around. Few people down in the village ventured to this area, as they'd have to pass by the manor, and no one wanted to run into the "demon" that resided within. On the edge of the forest rose the mountains, so high that one had to crane one's neck to see the snow-capped summit. If the villagers wanted to gather herbs and berries in the mountains, they used a longer, winding route that put as much distance between them and the manor as possible.

"How long have you been hunting?"

More than fifty years.

"Five years."

His gaze rove over her figure, where she sat on the horse with ease and grace, as if it were no different than sitting on a sofa. There was admiration in his eyes—was it her imagination? It had to be. She was swathed in a cloak, veil, and boots; only her gleaming eyes showed. She couldn't be attractive.

"Still, I'm surprised that your mistress lets you hunt as if you were a man."

"I'm a natural," Sybil said, raising her chin. Arrogant, she knew, but she spoke the truth. As a beast, she could see, hear, and attack much better than an average human. "My mistress doesn't mind if I can bring home plenty of game. Sometimes Laurent or Flavien travel to town; it is then I can step in their shoes and provide the manor with fresh meat."

"Extraordinary." His tone was admiring, no question about it. "Tell me what I should know about hunting. I should hate to be a hindrance."

"You need to stand perpendicular to the tip of your arrow." She drew out an arrow from her quiver and demonstrated. "Wait until you see the

front shoulders of the deer, then aim for the lungs or the heart. You want to go for a clean kill, and after your arrow finds the mark, you must...”

She shut her mouth abruptly. Her superior, inhuman senses told her there was deer nearby.

“Alma?”

Sybil put a finger to her lips. The veil blocked her face but he got the meaning immediately. She dismounted; the deer was located in a dark, dense patch of fir trees. Her mare was well trained and stayed quietly where it was, knowing that Sybil would return.

Cautiously, Sybil approached the fir trees, Gerald following closely behind.

There it was—a beautiful, tawny whitetail, sniffing through the snow, looking for scraps. Sybil drew her arrow and loosened the string. Her arrow flashed through the air in a brilliant streak of silver and found its target. The deer staggered, the arrow protruding from its body, and it limped in the direction of the mountains.

Gerald darted ahead, bow in hand, but she caught his arm.

“Wait.”

He looked back at her, his gaze questioning. Some men would have shaken her off and proceeded.

“It’s best to wait a while before chasing a wounded deer. If we try to catch it now, the deer will panic and move faster. It will develop a nasty flavor brought upon from the stress.”

“I see.” Gerald lowered his bow. “You indeed have much experience in hunting.”

Because I’ve been hunting for decades. She suddenly felt old and weary, rather than filled with pride from his praise.

They proceeded at a snail’s pace, following the bloody trail left by the wounded deer. Another advantage of winter hunting—the bright red splatters stood out in the snow.

“How did you sense a deer from that far?” Gerald said. “It was completely concealed in the trees. I couldn’t see a thing.”

My pointy ears and dog-like nose did the trick. Sybil shrugged. “I had a hunch and it turned out I was lucky.”

“Now you’re being unusually modest,” he teased. “I wouldn’t expect that you’d attribute success to luck.”

“Success isn’t always the result of hard work,” Sybil said stiffly. “Timing, chances, and of course luck, can be one of the factors.” She stopped and held up a hand. “We should retreat.”

“Why?”

She pointed. “There’s a wolf ahead; it probably found the deer already.”

“Is that all?” He sounded as if she said there was a rabbit ahead. “I’ll take care of the wolf.”

“Have you forgot how Laurent and Flavien were attacked? They were lucky that the wolf that bit them didn’t have rabies, but this one might.”

“I’ll take care to stay away from its jaws.” He didn’t stop walking. “I’ve fought foes far worse than a wolf.”

“Gerald!”

She ran to catch up with him, but it was too late. The trail of blood led to a clearing, where the deer lay on the ground, its neck covered in blood. A large grey wolf was feasting on the flesh.

Gerald let his arrow fly, but it only struck a spot near the wolf. The animal growled and lunged forward.

“Run!” Sybil shouted. She nocked an arrow and shot at the wolf. As the animal was moving fast, her arrow only nicked its hind leg, barely drawing blood.

The wolf snarled and flew in her direction, saliva dripping from its jaws.

Gerald pulled out a knife, and threw it at the wolf. The knife was a black blur as it spun through the air. Crimson drops of blood splattered on the ground. Sybil widened her eyes. The knife was so sharp that the wolf’s head was severed completely from its body.

“It’s dead,” she said, wonderingly. He had better aim than she expected, after his lousy display of archery.

“I pretended it was an old enemy with four legs on the ground.”

“You *idiot*.” She stamped a foot on the ground, causing bits of snow flying. “Did you know you could’ve been killed?”

“There’s little chance of that.” He picked up the knife and wiped the blood off the blade. “Alma, I’ve fought seven-foot trolls who are three times larger than this wolf.”

“Do you expect me to remember that when the wolf was going to attack you? Troll or wolf, they’re both dangerous and shouldn’t be taken

lightly. And don’t underestimate a wolf—if it gave you rabies, you could be dead.”

“I’m sorry.” He touched her arm lightly. “But I’m glad you’re concerned for me.”

The gentleness in his tone and look made her unable to answer for a moment. She had a sudden desire to lay her head on his shoulder, and make him promise not to put himself into danger—at least not before discussing with her.

Sybil unfastened a sturdy leather bag that hung from her saddle. The bag was large, but not large enough to hold an entire deer, so she set to dressing the animal.

“May I borrow your knife?”

“By all means.”

While Gerald kept watch, Sybil made a long incision between the deer’s pelvis and sternum. She split the rib cage, discarded the lungs and heart, and rolled the deer over to drain excessive blood. As she tied the carcass with strings and stuffed it into the bag, Gerald gave her another of his admiring gazes.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” he said.

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

“Plenty.” He smiled. “For one thing, I have no idea how to dress a deer.”

“You can easily learn.” Sybil tightened the straps on the bag’s mouth. “It’s not a difficult skill, once you’ve dressed dozens of deer.”

“I haven’t met many women, I admit, but I can say with certainty that there’s no woman in Savony who can do half the things you’re capable of.”

“But they don’t have to wear this.” She touched her veil.

Which turned out to be a huge mistake. Somehow, after riding through the woods and chasing the deer and fighting the wolf, the knot on the veil had become loose. She should’ve sensed it, but she had never worn her veil when hunting, and she was too focused on dressing the deer as fast as she could.

A light movement brushed against her nose and lips, replaced by a sudden coolness on her face.

Sybil made a wild grab for her veil, but it was too late. The silky material fluttered to the ground, a dark heap on the snow.

CHAPTER 17

Gerald froze. He couldn't tear his gaze away; it was as if a magnetic force drew him to her face, and he was powerless to fight against it. Underneath the veil, her skin was a morbid gray, like the color of a tombstone. Scales covered her chin and cheeks, and when her mouth fell open in horror, sharp, pointed teeth were revealed.

He had known Alma was exceedingly self-conscious about her looks, but even in his wildest imagination, he couldn't have dreamed that she would have a face resembling a demon's.

So that was why she wore the veil. He could understand the reason for her actions, but at the same time he wished she wouldn't look terrified, as if she were caught guilty of murder. Having faced trolls on a regular basis since he turned twelve, Alma's appearance didn't unnerve him. Once the shock wore off, all he thought of were her silver eyes, filled with fear.

"Alma…" He stretched out a hand, wanting to apologize and reassure her that he wasn't afraid. He had told her that looks didn't matter as much as the mind, and he meant it. He was horrified, but he wasn't going to think less of her.

But she shrank away as if he said he was going to arrest her and throw her into prison. She tore through the spaces between trees and bushes, running to her horse. She leaped on the saddle, as nimble as a mountain cat, and cantered away through the forest.

Gerald stood motionless for a moment, before he remembered the deer carcass lying on the snow. With little effort, he slung the sack over his back and mounted his horse. Luckily, Alma's horse had left sufficient

trails in the snow. Some hoof prints intersected with his own horse's, when they set out from the manor, but eventually he found his way back to the manor.

A flash of indigo blue appeared near the gate. She had waited to make sure he had arrived back safely.

"Alma!" Gerald hurried through the gate and up the winding path, but she was surprisingly fast. She didn't take the main door, but instead disappeared behind the west wing. There was the sound of a door slamming shut. He reached the door, but it was locked. By this time, she must have returned to her room.

Disappointed, he turned back. His horse had found its way back to the stables and was happily drinking from a pail of water. Bernardin was armed with a cloth, wiping dirt and snow from Alma's mare. He looked up, a question in his eyes that meant, "Can I help you?"

Gerald shook his head and unfastened the bag containing the deer carcass. He strode to the main door and knocked. It swung open in an instant.

"Your Highness!" Victoire sounded relieved. "I thought you had returned with Alma, but she just came through the side door and vanished upstairs. Is everything all right?"

Gerald hung his cloak on the rack in the parlor. "Is she under a curse?"

Victoire's eyes grew as round as the moon. "How did you..."

"I saw her face. She claimed she was disfigured, but no disease would make scales grow on her face."

The maid uttered a shriek. "You saw her! No wonder she… oh, I can't believe that…"

"She's scared, and I understand," Gerald said, his heart heavy as lead. He now understood why she was keen to stay away from him. It was because she dreaded he'd discover how she looked under the veil. "I'm a magic user, and I've been making spells for twenty years. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Don't need magic; all you need is..." Her voice faded away.

This was something he was familiar with. "You're not allowed to speak about the curse."

She nodded, her expression sorrowful.

"Not even through writing or gestures?"

The maid cast her gaze on the ground. If she could tell, she would've done it long ago.

Gerald rubbed his forehead. If Freja were here, she could've lifted the silencing charm, just as she did for their own curse months ago. But he couldn't ask her to come to the manor at this moment. She had enough on her plate creating the countercurse to deal with the trolls. But if he had the chance to see her, he'd raise the question.

* * *

AS HE HAD EXPECTED, Alma refused to show her face in the next several days—she didn't even come out of her room. Gerald haunted the library, pacing in the huge room lined with books, occasionally in the corridor, clinging to the hope that she'd eventually surrender and come out. But no matter how long he stayed, the best he could do was see a crack of the room within when Victoire entered with a tray of food.

During the times when he wasn't on the third floor, he'd make trips to the river and watch the progress of the re-construction of the bridge. It was still bitterly cold when the wind attacked his face—but snowfalls were fewer and didn't last long. The villagers had started work on the bridge, but it would take some time until it could be fully restored.

Not a day went by without thinking of Alma and what he would say to her. He wanted to apologize, to comfort her, to tell her that her looks didn't matter and he valued her companionship, but how was he to do it? He couldn't batter down her door by sheer strength. Knowing how proud she was, he was afraid that he'd make things worse if he tried to force his way into her room.

The other servants tried to help, but Alma refused to listen to anyone. One day Flavien suggested that they stop bringing food to Alma's room.

"She'll have to come out if she's hungry."

"I'm not sure that is the best solution," Gerald said. "We are not punishing a disobedient child by sending him to bed without supper. Alma is a strong-willed woman; she won't come out unless she's half-starved."

"Don't do it," Victoire said, glaring at her brother. "She'll be furious if we starve her into submission."

“Has Lady de la Roche said anything about Alma’s current state of mind?”

A brief silence ensued as the servants looked at each other. Then Victoire shrugged, her locket swaying in the front of her dark dress.

“The lady’ll give her time. She knows her well.”

Gerald nodded, though the furtive exchange of glances between Victoire and Flavien made him suspect there was something they weren’t telling him. But to put the question at the moment didn’t seem a good idea, what with the guarded expressions on the servants’ faces.

He decided to seek out Margot. The older woman had a soft spot for him—it was evident from the lavishly prepared meals every evening. She might reveal something, unless she, too, was under a silencing charm.

By this time, Gerald was familiar with the layout of the manor. Margot was most likely to be in the kitchen, or the little sitting room next to the kitchen, where she sometimes relaxed with her children and sometimes with Laurent.

He found her in the cozy little room with the door open. Dried flowers hung on the wall, a pot of hot chocolate sat on the table, the rich aroma permeating the room with the faint scent from the flowers. Laurent was seated on the other end, his hands clasped and placed on the table, his forehead creased.

“She still hasn’t ate anything for lunch?” he said in a low voice.

“Just a few spoonfuls of the beef bourguignon.” Margot sounded weary. “And tomorrow—that’s the day when we all...” Her voice trailed off, and she looked away.

Laurent placed an arm around her shoulder, murmuring words of comfort. Gerald was no keen observer of romantic affections, but from Laurent’s warm, intimate tone and the trusting manner in which Margot leaned into his touch, he felt instinctively that there was something between the steward and the cook.

“She will come around,” Laurent said. “Perhaps we should...” He glanced up, and his words died when he saw Gerald standing outside. “Your Highness. Is there anything we can do for you?”

Gerald decided to test his theory.

“Lady de la Roche still hasn’t eaten anything?”

Margot stared at him, her eyes wide. “How did you know…”

“Stop,” Laurent hissed, but it was too late.

“Alma is the lady of the house,” Gerald said, looking at them in the eye. “From the way she behaved, the manner in which she talked, there was no way she could be a mere lady’s companion.”

The two elder servants exchanged glances. Margot nudged Laurent and whispered, “No harm in telling him, now he knows.”

The steward shut his eyes for a second, then shrugged. “Do what you want.”

“Forgive me for prying, but I assure you I have nothing but the best intentions. I want to help in any way I can.” Gerald sat down. “I assume that Alma isn’t her real name?”

Margot sighed. “Her name’s Sybil. Alma is the name of her mother.”

“Sybil?” The name rang a bell in his head. “Lady Sybil de la Roche?”

“Have you heard of her?” Laurent said, looking skeptical. “We thought everyone assumed she was dead and would’ve forgotten her.”

“We have a portrait of her in the castle.” Gerald tried to recall what she looked like—he had seen the portrait a few times, but he didn’t have her image committed to memory. But he was certain that she was beautiful. Enzo had once joked that if he were their grandfather, he’d pick Sybil over their grandmother. She was supposed to be dead, more than forty years ago. And yet she was here, very much alive, trapped under a curse.

“She must have been cursed for...forty years?”

“Forty-two years, seven months, and thirteen days,” Laurent said with Arksan precision. “She was eighteen when that dastardly witch came and laid the curse on her.”

“How did it happen?”

“Moira—that’s the witch’s name—was desperate to look beautiful, but she could never achieve the human standard of beauty. The only way was through forbidden magic. Using an extremely complex spell, she could occupy a human’s body.”

“And so she wanted Sybil’s body.”

“My mistress refused, of course. Moira flew into a rage and cursed her to look like a demon. Only through...” His voice died away. Laurent cleared his throat and tried again. “Only if one...” A dull, hollow sound came from his throat. The steward opened and closed his mouth, but he couldn’t speak more. A feeling that Gerald was all too familiar with.

“You’re under a silencing charm,” he said. “I know a mage—she mayn’t be able to lift the curse, but I’m certain she can remove the

charm.” He noted that compared to the troll curse, Moira’s silencing charm worked differently with the manor servants. They could tell him the origin of the curse, everything except the way to break it.

Hope sparkled in their eyes.

“But first, we have to convince Sybil to leave her room.”

* * *

ONCE HE WENT BACK to his room, Gerald put on a heavy cloak and boots. He told Laurent where he was going, and went out. It was noticeably warmer. By the time he reached the bridge, sweat had gathered on his neck. Gerald took off the cloak and carried it under his arm.

The bridge was almost done. The wooden arch stretched from one end to the other, and needed only several planks to be fitted and nailed into the walking surface.

Just you wait, Sybil. No wonder she was so frustrated, so moody, so depressed. To have been one of the most beautiful women in the kingdom, and then cursed to look like a demon. Her face was frightening, he had to admit it, but he couldn’t say she was ugly. She didn’t have warts or scars. She was more like a beautiful thing that was cruelly twisted and no longer looked normal.

Gerald strolled along the river bank for a while, thinking of how he could help Sybil break her curse. When he turned to go back to the manor, his gaze caught something gleaming in a bush laden with bits of snow. Feeling curious, Gerald approached the bush. There, tangled amid the twigs, was the compass.

The very compass he had lost.

It must have caught in the bush when he stumbled through the snowstorm, his brain half-addled. Previously, when he came to the river, he hadn’t discovered the compass because the bush was covered in snow, but now that the weather was warmer, enough snow had melted, revealing the compass.

He placed it on his palm and it spun, pointing north. The tip glowed orange, telling him that Urdu’s location wasn’t near, but reachable.

Joy flowed through him—the icy wind blew again, but he barely felt the chill. Here was a chance to kill two birds with one stone. Tucking the

compass into his pocket, Gerald set back to the manor.

CHAPTER 18

Sybil slid off her bed onto the carpeted floor. Her head remained dizzy from too much sleep. She didn't want to get up, but her body ached from lying in bed for hours. She couldn't stay in bed all day, even though she had stayed in her room for seven consecutive days. Her coverlet was a disastrous sight, raked from her claws, and her mirror lay shattered into pieces. Punching the mirror had relieved her feelings, but she couldn't escape her reflection. She could still see herself in the windowpane.

Had Gerald left yet? She couldn't face him. She knew he was too chivalrous to shun her, but nor did she want his pity. Even now she remembered hearing his gasp, and seeing the horror and shock when he looked at her face. She had felt like releasing a stream of curses, but being raised a lady, she didn't know any words strong enough to express her emotions.

She was a coward. She shouldn't have discussed her books with the prince, she shouldn't have gone hunting with him, she shouldn't have let herself hope. For the first time in her life, she wanted a man to want her back, curse or not. He didn't mind she was prickly, tart, challenging. But that was when she had her veil on. She'd rather not see him at all, than see him trying to conceal his distaste and disgust for her hideous form.

Someone knocked on the door. Victoire's voice traveled through the wood. "Milady, I've brought dinner."

"I don't want any."

"You haven't eaten anything at lunch, milady. Please, at least try to eat something."

With a sigh, Sybil opened the door. Gerald stood outside, Victoire's shorter form a little distance away, a guilty look on her face. Sybil tried to shut the door, but he braced an arm against the hard wood, and the next second he slipped inside as swift and noiselessly as a cat.

"Get out!" she spat.

His feet was planted firmly in the corner farthest from the door, his eyes fixed firmly on her face. "I'm sorry, but I had to see you."

"I don't want to see you." She pointed toward the door. "If you don't leave, I'm going to have Laurent throw you out." And Victoire, too. She couldn't believe her handmaid had conspired with the prince.

"Sybil, I have something important to tell you."

A breath caught in her throat. "Who told you my name?"

"It doesn't matter." He held up his hands. "I knew you couldn't be a lady's companion. The way you carried yourself was more of a highborn lady. Please, calm down and let me talk. I know that you are cursed. I want to help you."

Sybil was all ready to call for Laurent, but at the word "curse," she paused. He was well read and experienced in magical studies, and as a prince, he might have connections to people she hadn't heard of.

"Sybil, do you remember why I ended up near your manor?"

"You said you wanted to find a mage."

He plunged a hand into his pocket and drew out a compass. On his palm, the compass spun and pointed north, the tip glowing orange. Sybil had read about enchanted compasses in some spell books. "The orange color indicates the mage dwells at a place within a day's ride."

It was too good to be true. "There's a mage living not far away?" she whispered in disbelief. And to think she had spent forty years as a beast!

"His name is Urdu. But I cannot be certain he will be there, for the last time he was sighted was many years ago. I enlisted the help of another mage, Freja, who created the tracking spell for this compass, and there were several locations where he was last found. My compass is only one of three possibilities."

"Wait. Why not just ask Freja to help you?"

"Because we need more than one mage to perform the countercurse. We need seven in total."

Gerald stepped closer. If she wasn't fully immersed in his story, she would have blushed. He was close enough to take her hand.

“The bridge is almost completed. We can leave, and if my compass doesn’t fail us, we can ask Urdu to take a look at you. He might be able to lift the curse.” At the hesitation in her eyes, he added, “Unless the curse is binding you to this place?”

“I can go out, but whenever I went to the village, people would stare.” Sybil remembered when the villagers stared at her veil, and a child had tried to snatch it off. Since then, she rarely went outside, and was content to let rumors spread about her.

He frowned. “Maybe I can ask the mage to come to the manor. If she can spare the time.”

“No, I’ll go.” Sybil raised her chin. “I would rather save the time of the mage traveling here. Besides, if the curse can be broken, I can withstand a few curious stares.”

“Good. Come with me then, Sybil.” He smiled. Oh, how she hated when he smiled. It reminded her of all that he was, and everything she was not. For a moment she was lost in his eyes. Quickly she looked away, not wanting him to see the blush that must be spreading over her face. He must think her an idiotic woman who had dared to presume, who aspired to something she shouldn’t want. She was a cursed woman, decades older than him, even though the magic kept her permanently at eighteen.

“All right,” she said coolly. “We’ll pack the first thing tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 19

In the end, it was decided that Laurent and Victoire would travel to Tybalt with Sybil and Gerald. Laurent had made several trips to Tybalt, and his Arksan appearance and manners would be useful when asking directions or finding lodgings. Victoire could lend a hand when Sybil dressed, and besides, she'd appreciate her handmaid's companionship on the journey.

Margot, however, took a different view. On the night when they started packing, she came to Sybil's room and tried to persuade her daughter to stay in the manor.

"You are not going with her ladyship to Tybalt," Margot said, hands on her hips. "Don't you see this is the perfect chance for her to break the curse? She is going to be traveling with the prince and you'll only be a hindrance."

"He won't propose," Sybil said curtly. "He saw my face under the veil. We have a better chance asking the mage to remove the curse."

"But what if the mage isn't successful?" Margot said. "Most mages these days are descendants of mages and humans. Their magic aren't as potent and powerful as those decades ago."

Sybil couldn't argue with that, but compared to the chances of a marriage proposal, a mage breaking the curse was a better bet.

"Mama, her ladyship will need someone to help her dress," Victoire said, pointing at a long brocaded gown trimmed in fur, lying on the bed. "And I promise I won't stand in the way. I want this curse broken as well."

"Victoire is coming with me," Sybil said firmly. "I cannot dress or do my hair properly without her help. Unless you want to take her place?" she

added, knowing well that Margot disliked long journeys. While the cook didn't mind going down to the village now and then, a journey around the mountains to Arksar, where the weather was even colder, would not agree with her.

Margot shuddered and shook her head. Victoire smiled and patted her mother's shoulder.

"Don't worry, Mama. I'll do *everything* to get the two of them together. If left alone, her ladyship is too shy to approach the prince."

"Don't keep your hopes up," Sybil warned. She had experienced so many rejections and setbacks that she'd learned to condition herself never to hope too much. If she didn't put all her heart into hoping something would happen, the disappointment wouldn't hurt so much if things didn't turn out the way she wanted.

Sybil shook her head and inspected the half-filled trunk on the foot of her bed. She could speculate dozens of possibilities at the moment, but speculation wasn't going to help. Far more useful to concentrate on packing as many veils as possible.

* * *

TYBALT TOOK at least three days. It wasn't far, but they had to take a longer route around the mountains. After discussing with Gerald and Laurent, Sybil decided they would take a carriage. Horses traveled faster, but Victoire couldn't ride. Besides, there was substantial luggage between the four of them.

Sybil was seated next to Gerald, their knees almost touching. Victoire insisted on sitting on the box outside with Laurent, promising she'd come in if it were too cold. It was spacious in the carriage, but nevertheless more intimate than their previous meetings in the library. Sybil set her hands on her knees, determined that she would act like a casual friend around him. He already saw her face. She wasn't going to let herself be deluded that it had no effect on him. Were their roles reversed, she would be disgusted at herself as well.

The carriage lurched. Taken by surprise, Sybil fell forward with a tiny gasp. Gerald steadied her with both hands on her shoulders. Her head bumped into his chest, and he let out a low grunt of pain.

“I’m sorry,” she said, settling back in her seat. Did Laurent do that on purpose? No, it was more likely that Victoire suggested the idea. By this time, she was so used to her servants’ antics that she didn’t even feel frustrated. She admitted with secret candor that she savored the moment when Gerald touched her.

“Never mind, but...” Gerald sounded hesitant. “Do you have something on your head?”

He saw her face already, so what mattered if he saw more?

Sybil pulled off her hennin, revealing two curved horns. “Was it painful when I ran into you?”

“A little, but nothing to worry about. I was more surprised than pained.”

He looked at her horns, and Sybil resisted the urge to cover them.

“They’re hideous.”

“Not at all,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone. “They’re fascinating. I mean it, Sybil.”

Words rushed to her lips, but she kept her lips shut. Would he lie to her if she asked him if he found her ugly? But if he said no, she wouldn’t believe him. Knowing his character, he would lie if he thought it’d make her feel better.

Fishing around for something else to say, she opened her mouth. “On that day we went hunting, you said you had fought trolls before you killed the wolf.”

“Thirteen years,” he said, locking his fingers together on his knee. “You see, since I was a child, there was a curse placed on my family. All the men born in the royal line had to duel with deadly trolls who lived underground every fortnight.”

He went on to describe the deadly curse, of how his father and grandfather had died because of the trolls, how his father had married his mother because she could predict the future, and how his aunt had procured spells to make the queen give birth to more children so there would be a bigger chance of them defeating the trolls. He described how they finally broke the curse, but it wasn’t because of a mage. They had cut down a huge silver tree where the magic originated.

“But if the tree was magical, how did you destroy it?”

“With this.” He brought out a knife. Sybil recognized it was the one he used to kill the wolf. “This is the Peerless Knife. It was wielded by my

ancestor, King Antoine. It is said to be so sharp that there's nothing it cannot pierce."

Sybil took the knife gingerly. "Is this what you used to hack down my gate?"

That explained how he entered the grounds. She hadn't expected that the prince would carry such a deadly weapon.

"I'm sorry about it."

"Don't apologize again. You're welcome to destroy a hundred gates if it meant you could survive." She closed her eyes for a second. The knife was useful, but it was useless in her case. Curses were more common than she thought. She had suffered, but Gerald and his brothers had it worse. At least she never had to worry for her life, although there were times she felt that being dead was more preferable then living as a beast.

"And that's why we must find Urdu. I'll write Freja once we reach Tybalt. If she can create a spell to defeat hundreds of trolls, then I'm reasonably sure that she can break your curse. Or at least lift the silencing charm." He paused and glanced away. Perhaps her face disgusted him. Even if she transformed back to her original self, he had seen her. He wouldn't forget how hideous she was.

Stop whining, she told herself. Breaking the curse was the priority. And once it was broken, she would be beautiful again, and she wouldn't have to worry about her lack of suitors.

That was when she realized she no longer cared about suitors anymore. Because she wanted only him.

CHAPTER 20

"This should be the last place where Urdu was seen." On Gerald's palm, the tip of the compass glowed white-gold. Normally the color implied the mage would be near, within walking distance. But they were in a clearing on the edge of the forest, and only a few cottages dotted nearby.

They arrived in Tybalt last night. It was late, too dark to be out searching, and besides, all of them were weary. All except Sybil, who displayed a healthy—and rather alarmingly large appetite—during dinner. The dinner was simple Arksan fare—mashed potatoes and roasted beef—but she consumed as much as for three people.

Maybe she was looking forward to the breaking of the curse. Gerald couldn't blame her, knowing that she had been beautiful before the magic turned her into a beast.

She wore her heavy veil and black velvet hennin, drawing suspicious stares from the innkeeper and his wife, but they didn't pry. Laurent had set a handful of golden ducats on the counter, more than enough for a day's lodging and meals for four. And once they knew Gerald was one of the Savony princes, their attention immediately latched onto him.

"What brings you to this part of Arksar, Your Highness?"

"Did our princess invite you?"

Gerald tried his best to evade the questions by feigning exhaustion; they apologized and left him alone, but he was sure they were whispering and debating about why the prince was visiting a remote town instead of one of the larger cities like Trond or Linberg.

Let them speculate. The more important thing to worry about is Urdu.

“No sign of any mage here,” Victoire said, looking around.

“We’ll inquire at the houses over there,” Sybil said, pointing. “Perhaps they will have some information for us.”

The first house contained a big family with seven children—all of them squealed and fawned over Gerald. The eldest daughter tried to invite him in for lunch, but he firmly refused. He couldn’t get away fast enough. The second house was owned by a middle-aged man whose wife had deserted him a month ago, his two sons away and working in the fields. While he didn’t bother Gerald, he stared and yelled at Sybil.

“Yer a witch!” He brandished a half-filled bottle in the air. “What’re yer hiding under that thing? Got two noses?”

And he tried to rip away Sybil’s veil. Gerald took Sybil’s arm and pulled her behind him, while Laurent grabbed the man’s shoulder and pushed him into the house.

“That was a lunatic,” Gerald muttered. He looked at Sybil, who was patting her veil.

“I could’ve handled him,” she said in a low, yet confident voice, “but thank you.”

He smiled, glad that she wasn’t too proud to thank him. “You’re welcome, Sybil.”

She turned away, heading to the third house.

An old woman answered the door. Straggly gray hair framed a wrinkled face with features that were still beautiful, even for her age. Her gaze roved over them, puzzling, curious, but not unfriendly.

“Yes?”

“Pardon for suddenly calling on you, Madame,” Gerald said with an affable smile. “My name is Gerald, and these are my companions—Sybil, Laurent, Victoire. We’re from Savony, and we’re looking for a man named Urdu.”

“Urdu!” She loosened her grip on the door. “How could you have known him?”

Relief filled his mind. The spell on the compass had worked. But on the other hand, he couldn’t believe Urdu was living in the house with the old woman.

“I assume he’s no longer living in Tybalt? Or even Arksar?”

“I don’t know where he is,” she croaked. “Why do you seek him?”

“May we come in?” Victoire asked. Snow had begun to fall.

“Sure.” The old woman opened the door wide. “My name’s Annalisa, by the way.”

A plump gray tabby cat rubbed his face on Gerald’s ankles when he passed through the threshold.

“There’s Maddie for you.” Annalisa grinned. “Always more attentive to handsome young men.”

As if to confirm her statement, Maddie meowed and slipped away when Victoire tried to pet her.

The interior of the cottage was cluttered. Sacks of flour and potatoes were piled against the wall, along with wooden chests, a few of them with their lids open, revealing blankets and cushions. The kitchen, which was just a space in the corner, was stacked with pots and pans and dirty cloths. When Annalisa moved toward the kitchen, saying she was going to brew a hot cup of tea for everyone, Victoire and Laurent crossed the room and offered to help her. Gerald threw a few logs in the fireplace and stoked the fire. The flames burst merrily; Sybil removed her cloak and folded it on her lap.

“Have you no kin living with you?” Gerald inquired.

“My husband died years ago, and my children and grandchildren are living in Trond,” she said wistfully. “They come once every year.”

A rush of sympathy for the old woman came over Sybil. If the witch had not cursed her servants as well, she’d be left alone in the manor, frozen in time. The picture made her shiver. For all the long years of suffering, it could’ve been worse.

When the kettle was boiling and Victoire came with mugs of tea, Sybil passed one to Annalisa.

“How did you know Urdu?” Sybil said.

Annalisa took the tea, but not before casting her veil an anxious glance. “He saved my life.”

“How?” Victoire asked, settling on a chair across Annalisa. She leaned forward with an eager gleam in her eyes. “Do tell us.”

Annalisa looked toward the fireplace, as if she could see herself decades ago.

“When I was sixteen, I was the most beautiful girl in Tybalt. The men were clamoring for my hand—the young ones fought each other, the married ones dangled trinkets for an affair. You can’t imagine it, I suppose, now I’m old and lost my looks?”

“You’re not ugly,” Gerald said in earnest. Annalisa smiled at him. Her eyes were still a brilliant blue, the shape of her nose aquiline, and her teeth perfectly formed except for one missing tooth. One could imagine that she had once been a beauty.

“One day a woman arrived in the village. She reminded me of a horse—her face was as long as an eggplant, and her eyes protruded like a toad’s. She heard of me and demanded my body.”

Victoire let out an indignant sound of protest. Laurent frowned. Sybil’s eyes flashed, but she remained calm, her hands folded primly on her lap.

“In return, she’d give my parents a thousand ducats. We were poor—Pa’s a woodcutter, but we weren’t starving. Ma refused to take her money, and the witch flew into a terrible rage. She killed Ma—” Annalisa’s lip quivered “—and bound me with magic. She was going to perform the spell that would allow her take my body.”

“But Urdu arrived and prevented Moira from committing this heinous crime.”

Annalisa stared at Sybil, her eyes wide. “You know the witch’s name?”

Sybil removed her veil. Gerald was surprised that she was willing to show her face to strangers. Perhaps it was because she saw Annalisa as a victim, like herself. Perhaps it was a ploy to urge Annalisa to reveal more about Urdu.

Annalisa’s hand shook. Tea splashed on her lap, but she barely noticed. “She did this...to you?”

“I’m guessing, but I believe this is what happened,” Sybil said quietly. “When Moira failed to possess you, she found another target—me. It didn’t take long for her to travel from Tybalt to the mountains in Savony. She wanted my body too, but her powers were weakened by Urdu, so the most she could do was lay a curse on me. That I should suffer the same fate as she.”

“You poor thing.” Annalisa shook her head. “That was decades ago—you had to live like this for so long.”

“Forty-two years,” Sybil said. “I’ve been trying to break the curse, but nothing worked. Do you know where Urdu might be?”

Gerald held his breath. Victoire and Laurent did the same.

Annalisa looked at her knees. “I haven’t heard from him since he saved me.”

His heart dropped. Felt like it was falling from the top of North Tower.

“Nothing?” Sybil was saying. She didn’t sound disappointed; more like resigned. Possibly she never held any hope since Annalisa told them she met Urdu when she was sixteen. “Is there no one who might know where he went?”

“He left as soon as Moira was gone.” Annalisa got to her feet and entered another room. In a moment she emerged, a silver ring gleaming on her palm. “He gave me this. Told me I can use it to call him if Moira returned and caused trouble. But I must not disturb him otherwise; he was a busy man and had a lot of problems that needed his powers.”

“How do you call to him?” Gerald said. A glimmer of hope flared in his mind.

“Tap the stone on the ring three times.” Annalisa looked nervous. “But he said not to bother him if I called him for no reason.”

“We have a perfectly good reason for calling him,” Sybil said, pointing at her scales. “I am also a victim of Moira’s avarice.”

Annalisa nodded, though she still appeared reluctant as she handed the ring to Sybil.

“Shall I summon him now?”

Gerald nodded.

Sybil tapped the ring. They waited. Nothing happened. She tapped it again. Moments passed, but apart from a meow from Maddie, nothing occurred. Sybil tried a third time. The ring lay flat on her palm, like any ordinary accessory. Nothing indicated it was enchanted by a mage.

“I guess he isn’t coming,” Gerald finally said. “It’s likely that the spell on the ring has long faded.”

Sybil’s left hand curled into a fist. After all, the tracking spell Urdu planted was a temporary measure to protect Annalisa from Moira’s clutches. It was never meant to last for decades.

“Sorry,” Annalisa said. “Truly. I wish I could help, but it’s the truth I’m telling. If I knew anything about Urdu, I’d tell you in a heartbeat.”

At that moment, something began to glow. But it wasn’t the ring from Urdu. Gerald’s bracelet was glowing crimson.

CHAPTER 21

"It's a signal from Freja."

"Who's that?" Victoire asked, her eyes wide as she stared at the bracelet.

"She is a mage from Arksar."

"Milady, that's wonderful! We can ask her to lift the curse for you!"

"Calm down." Sybil held up a hand. "The mage is currently occupied; she might not be able to spare enough magic to break our curse."

"But I'm sure she has enough power to lift the silencing charm placed on you," Gerald added. "It would be helpful if we know how to break the curse."

Victoire clapped her hands. "Then it'll be no problem, as it's really easy! Just..." Her voice died out as the silencing charm vanquished the sound of her voice.

Gerald turned toward Sybil with a mildly puzzled expression. "This curse has lasted for forty-two years, yet the way to break it is simple?"

Sybil wasn't sure how to answer. At the same time a niggling doubt tugged at her mind: if Freja lifted the silencing charm and Gerald learned that the curse could be broken with a proposal, would he offer marriage to her? But she didn't want him to propose for the sake of the curse.

If he breaks the curse and sees you with your former beauty, he might be willing to go along with marriage.

The thought wasn't comforting. That would put Gerald on the same level as the men who were crazy about her just because she was startlingly beautiful.

Fortunately, she was saved from answering when a muffled female voice emitted from the bracelet.

“Greetings, Prince Gerald. King Tyrell of Arksar has invited you to a trip to Linberg. Your brothers have already reached the palace. I will be arriving in a few days, once I complete a tricky portion of the countercurse. Let us meet there.”

The glow in the bracelet faded.

“Was that the mage?” Victoire and Laurent asked.

“That’s her,” Gerald confirmed. He looked around at them and said, “I must go to Linberg. Right away—there’s no time to waste.”

“May we come along?” Laurent said. There was a longing in his tone. Sybil understood. Laurent was born in Linberg and, through the recommendation of her father’s friend, came to work at their manor. He returned to Linberg occasionally but had never made the trip after the curse.

“Of course,” Gerald said. “Once Freja arrives, I’ll ask her to take a look at you. Hopefully she’ll be able to break the curse; if not, she’ll lift the silencing charm.”

“Then it’s settled,” Victoire said joyfully. “Oh, this is most exciting! I’ve never been to Linberg. Do you suppose we’ll get to meet the king and queen? And the princess?”

Sybil said nothing as she smoothed the veil on her lap.

Coming to Tybalt was one thing—it was a village and there weren’t many people who’d gape and speculate about her veil. But going to Linberg, the most populated city in Arksar, the risk of her revealing her face was far higher. A street urchin, an impudent drunk, or even a wary guard might snatch off her veil and see her scaly face. No normal person could have a face with scales. She might even be arrested and kept in a cell until someone determined she was no threat—although, of the latter, there was no guarantee.

But on the other hand, she couldn’t pass up the chance to meet Freja. She had been working on the tracking spell for ages, clinging to the sliver of hope that she might find a mage, and here was a ready opportunity. Revealing her face was a risk, a dangerous one even, but it would be worth the effort if she could break the curse. It wasn’t just about herself. All her servants would be free as well.

“Sybil?” Gerald said, with concern in his eyes. “If you’d rather not undertake the journey to Linberg, I’m sure either Victoire or Laurent would be fine.”

He read her mind. Her heart warmed—he couldn’t see her expression, yet he knew what she was thinking.

“Who said I’m not going?” Sybil stood up. “Let’s not waste any more time.”

* * *

SYBIL COULDN’T REMEMBER what Linberg was like. She had been there when she was a young girl—fifty years ago. Her parents had taken her to the capital of Arksar for a visit. She remembered a hazy vision of tall walls, but no more.

A pang struck her when she thought of her parents. They had been loving, doting, treating her like she was a little empress. Every demand she made was fulfilled, every stamp and yell smothered with reassuring words of comfort, every tear followed by crooning and hugs. Her nursemaid had tried to enforce discipline, such as telling her she had to say “thank you” when a servant did something for her, but Sybil never bothered. Or said “thank you” when she felt like it. Her parents didn’t mind. As long as her behavior didn’t reach an outrageous level (she never slapped a servant, for the record), she could be as haughty and demanding as she liked. The privilege of beauty. People usually turned a blind eye to the coveted minority who sparkled and dazzled wherever they went.

And then the days, weeks, that followed when the curse struck. Everyone looked upon her with fear, distaste, disgust. Her parents had been frantic when they returned from a journey to Linberg and found her completely changed.

Her mother didn’t take it well. Suddenly, the loving, laughing mother she used to know would coil away in horror, her body trembling and her eyes filled with fear. “Monster!” she’d shriek. “You are no daughter of mine!”

Eventually her father left for Masaro, taking his half-mad wife with him, telling the outside world that Sybil was dead. A plausible explanation

—the parents were so overcome with grief that they had to leave the place where their daughter “died.”

It was the first rejection she had in her eighteen years, and the one that hurt her the most. To this day, she couldn’t think of her mother’s terrified expression without a twinge of pain.

Sybil involuntarily shivered. Had her mother truly loved her? Or was she merely a pretty doll put on display?

“Are you cold?” Gerald said, offering her a folded blanket. Laurent had stocked the carriage with plenty of rugs and blankets. Arksar was farther north and had an even colder climate.

“Not at all,” Sybil quickly said. She made a snarling face with both hands curled in a predatory gesture. “I have fur, remember?”

To her surprise, he didn’t flinch. He actually laughed. Laughed, as if she were a child who had done something amusing. She didn’t know whether to feel relieved or insulted.

“You can never scare me, Sybil,” he said, smiling. “I’ve seen trolls. I’ve defeated a nine-foot troll with a foot-long tongue and claws as long as daggers. If I were to compare him to a tiger, you’re only a harmless kitten.”

“Your perception of kittens is aberrant,” she informed him tartly. “If trolls don’t frighten you, is there anything you’re scared of?”

“Plenty.” He was silent for a moment. Sybil darted a glance in his direction; pain crossed over his face. She longed to reach out and touch his arm, but she stayed still.

“Tell me.” If she couldn’t touch him, she could talk to him.

When he didn’t answer, she added, “Tell me, so I can believe you’re human.”

Amusement danced in his eyes, but faded soon. “Sometimes I have trouble falling asleep. Nightmares haunt me. My youngest brother was stabbed through the gut and nearly died. My second youngest brother almost had his head bitten off by a troll. And so I am fearful. Fearful of the day that the trolls will break free from their underground lair, and cause total chaos and destruction.”

Sybil didn’t say anything. She didn’t comfort him and say, “We’ll find the mage,” because she’d had enough disappointment in her life. No need to bolster his confidence when she couldn’t be certain Urdu would be found. But she gave in to her desire to comfort him. She laid her hand

(still in gloves) on top of his, a slight pressure that conveyed her support. He didn't move.

"I've always wanted siblings," she said. "Father considered having a male heir, but Mother wasn't interested. She had an agonizing experience giving birth to me. My nursemaid said she nearly died."

"My parents made a conscious decision to produce as many children as possible," Gerald said. "It was my father's notion that the more of us there were to battle trolls, the more chance we could hold them off. He procured fertility charms for my mother, though they were costly and half of them should be illegal."

"And your mother didn't mind?"

"She's a seer. A faulty seer, but she did see her future with twelve children. My mother never questioned her fate."

"You must be close to your brothers."

"Not all of them, but I try to look out for them, along with Theo." He started telling her about his eleven siblings, from Theo's deliberate attempt to intimidate people to shy, vulnerable Roland.

Sybil listened attentively—she had heard of the twelve princes, but always through distant rumors.

She forgot how time passed until the carriage slowed and Laurent knocked on the door.

"We've two hours and twenty-nine minutes till we reach Linberg, milady."

* * *

SYBIL DRANK in the sight of lofty walls surrounding the city. Linberg and Trond used to be two separate states, hundreds of years ago, and frequently at war. Not until the great King Bjorn rose and consolidated power, conquering Trond and other cities in an alarmingly quick manner, did the place become the Arksan kingdom known across the continent, sea, and desert.

They gained swift entry into the city—something Sybil hadn't anticipated. With the forty-feet-high wall surrounding the city, she expected the sentries would interrogate them and demand for proof of identity, like a signet ring or something.

But once Gerald gave his name and title, the guard immediately bowed and let them pass, all the while blushing and stuttering like a fifteen-year-old damsel. Even when Gerald had his spectacles on. They had got him a pair when they passed Trond, because too many Arksans were pausing and staring.

“Have you ever been to Linberg?” Sybil asked. The carriage swayed as it came to a road that sloped downward. Linberg was a city built on hilly terrain. Not as rich and prosperous as the second biggest Arksan city, Trond, but there was a majestic air that spoke of decades of politics and power.

“Never.” Gerald was peering out the window with unmistakable fascination, although the Arksan architecture was generally more simple and practical compared to Savony. “The curse prevented us from being away for an extended period of time. We had to battle the trolls every fortnight. But we did have Iliana visit us in the castle.”

The Arksan princess. Sybil had heard that the queen gave birth to a daughter after the son died, but she couldn’t remember when that happened.

“How old is the princess?”

“Iliana is sixteen. When she came, people had been hoping that she’d fall in love with Theo and marry him.”

“But she didn’t.” From what he described of his surly brother, Sybil had a feeling that Iliana would be more likely drawn to Gerald.

“Mother predicted he would be attracted to someone else.” The corner of Gerald’s mouth curved. “She was right. Alix may not be a princess, but she’s perfect for him. She isn’t afraid to voice her opinion in front of him. Besides, she cared enough for him to risk her life.”

He told her about how Alix came to the castle and how she gradually wormed her way into his brother’s heart. By the time he finished, they could see the Linberg palace rising in the end of the road.

“Has your mother predicted anything for you?” Sybil asked. She hoped she didn’t sound too eager.

Gerald shook his head. “It’s just as well she didn’t, because I’d rather not spend the time wondering if her prediction will come true. Usually her predictions are nonsense, but on two important occasions—Roland’s injury and Theo’s bride—she had been right.”

The carriage stopped. They were right outside the palace.

CHAPTER 22

The Arksan palace was vastly different from the Savon castle. As Gerald looked up at the white marble structure, with candles glowing within diamond-shaped windows and icicles glistening under slanted roofs, he thought the palace exuded a magical atmosphere, whereas the Savon castle was decidedly more earthly, with the algae-covered moat and yellow-brick towers.

Sybil seemed nervous. Even though she had put on a half-mask made of silk (for extra caution), donned the veil, and jammed the hennin over her curved horns, Gerald could sense that below all those layers, she was apprehensive.

Naturally. She hadn't left her manor for forty years. They briefly stayed in Tybalt and Trond, but this time she was entering a palace. Gerald had suggested that she amuse herself in the city while he went ahead to the palace—she hesitated, but eventually said she wanted to come with him.

"The mage might have arrived already," she said, with a confident tilt of her chin.

Before they stepped out of the carriage, Gerald touched her arm. She looked at him, eyebrows raised in surprise, and he said gently, "It'll be all right. Perhaps, in a few hours, you'll be restored to your former self."

"Perhaps." Her tone held no confidence. But she straightened her shoulders with the air of a warrior going to battle, knowing that victory was impossible.

To tell the truth, Gerald wasn't quite sure if Freja would be able to break Sybil's curse. If a curse could last for decades, it was uncommonly powerful. And mages, powerful as they are, didn't have infinite reserves of

magic. But he remained hopeful. They had broken the troll curse—a curse that all the previous Arksan kings were unable to destroy.

“There you are!” A voice, loud and boisterous, echoed through the frigid air. “Good thing you finally showed up, because we were about to turn into icicles.”

Two young men with identical features hurried toward him, arms outstretched. The next second he was engulfed in a fierce hug.

“We missed you.” Ethan wiped an imaginary tear off his face. “Our flower of the family has grown even more lovely.”

“You’ve put on weight.” Enzo shook his head in disbelief. “Weren’t you supposed to be surviving the deep, dark forests in Arksar? And here you look like you had a swell time in the Masaro capital, consuming hot chocolate for breakfast every day.”

The last sentence was actually the true. Margot supplied him with generous helpings, despite his admittedly feeble protests. He had more hot chocolates in Sybil’s manor than the amount he’d had for a year.

“I spent the past month under the excellent care of Lady...Alma.” His gaze cut toward Sybil for a brief second. They had agreed that she would stop pretending to be a lady’s maid, but that she use a false name. It was less trouble if people didn’t know she was Lady Sybil de la Roche, though the chances of anyone in Arksar knowing about her were slim. “I almost died in a snowstorm, but she found me.”

The twins took a look at Sybil and broke into identical smirks. With the veil covering her entire face and her claws safely concealed in thick gloves, they couldn’t tell she had the face of a demon. Besides, she had her back to them, and her tall, slender figure would’ve fooled anyone into thinking she was a beautiful woman.

“In that case, you should offer her marriage.” Enzo was anything but subtle. “The best way to show your gratitude is to serve her with your undying devotion for the rest of your life.”

“Alix saved Theo’s life and he’s going to marry her one day, so there’s no reason why you shouldn’t emulate him.”

“You’re saying that because you want to eliminate competition for Iliana’s hand.”

“As if *you* aren’t doing the same...”

“That’s enough,” Gerald said sharply. He cast an anxious look in Sybil’s direction; she must’ve heard the twins. Considering her pride, she

must’ve been furious but was too proud to speak up. “Has any of you discovered Urdu?”

The question instantly wiped away the bright grins on their faces. The two of them hung their heads like repentant children.

“I guess this means you haven’t, either,” Ethan finally said.

Gerald’s heart sank to the soles of his boots. He glanced at Sybil, but she remained silent. Perhaps she already anticipated this. Perhaps—he remembered a scrap of conversation between Laurent and Margot—perhaps Sybil was so used to disappointment that she’d learned not to hope too much.

“Oh.” He couldn’t keep the disappointment from his tone. “I thought if Freja summoned us, it would have something to do with Urdu’s location.”

“Let’s talk inside!” Enzo slung an arm around their shoulders. “My nose is going to fall off if we stay out there any longer, and imagine how damaging that is to my good looks.”

Inside the palace, a servant dressed in an ice-blue uniform led them to a large sitting room with a roaring fire. Gerald noted how Sybil stationed herself in a corner while Laurent and Victoire drew close to the fire, sighing in relief.

“Gerald, are you listening?” Ethan waved a hand in front of his face. “Did the snow freeze your ears off?”

“Sorry. What were you saying?”

“Do you know what’s the day after tomorrow?”

He shrugged.

“Iliana’s birthday,” Enzo said in a loud whisper. “She’s turning seventeen.”

“And she’s inviting us to a ball.” Ethan rubbed his hands in glee. “That’s why we’re here.”

Gerald understood. They needed a reason to be guests at the palace (they couldn’t tell everyone they were here to meet Freja), and Iliana’s birthday was a convenient excuse.

“Where are Julian and Claudia?”

“Claudia caught a severe cold and Julian took her back to Savony. Anyway, his letter assured us that they didn’t find anything at Urdu’s old house.”

Gerald pressed his lips together. So despite Freja’s attempts, the compasses had not brought them to Urdu. Was the mage even alive?

The servant at the door cleared his throat. “His Majesty the King. Her Majesty the Queen.”

King Tyrell and Queen Ingrid entered the room. Both of them were tall, as typical of Arksans, and blond with blue eyes. Laurent, Gerald realized, was definitely shorter than the average Arksan. He was fully a head shorter than King Tyrell. As for the queen, she was about the same height as Sybil, even slightly taller. He could see how Iliana resembled her mother, as Ingrid was beautiful.

Both Tyrell and Ingrid drew in deep breaths when they saw him.

“Welcome, Prince Gerald.” Tyrell spread out his hands.

Gerald bowed low and expressed his gratitude for inviting him and his brothers to Arksar.

“We are honored you have decided to join us for our daughter’s birthday celebrations.”

“Iliana mentioned how much she enjoyed her stay,” Ingrid added. “It is only fitting that we return the favor. If there is anything you wish to see or need, you have only to ask.”

“Thank you.” Gerald’s words were more than common courtesy. Iliana may have enjoyed her stay in Savony, but on her journey back to Arksar, he and his brothers had lain in ambush, hoping that they would be able to frighten her into sending an alarm to the mage, Freja. It worked, and he would’ve done it again, but he would always feel sorry for the shock and fear they have caused Iliana. The princess had done nothing wrong. “We are the ones who are honored.”

Tyrell’s gaze drifted to Sybil and her servants. “And these are?”

“This is my friend, Lady Alma, and her two servants.” Gerald quickly related how he was caught in a storm and “Alma” had saved him. “She has always wished to see Linberg. I hope you don’t mind that I brought her along.”

“Not at all,” Tyrell said, though he wore a puzzled frown. Ingrid looked like she wanted to lift Sybil’s veil.

“Your Majesty.” Sybil curtsied. While she kept her veil on, her movement was graceful and poised, leaving no doubt that she was a well-bred lady. “I apologize for intruding on your hospitality. We can seek accommodation in the city.”

“That will not be necessary,” Ingrid said. “As it is our daughter’s birthday and many will be arriving in the city, suitable lodgings would be

difficult to procure. A friend of a Savon prince is always welcome."

Suspecting that she'd protest, Gerald shook his head and raised his eyebrows at her, asking her to accept the invitation.

She curtsied again. "Thank you for your generosity, Your Majesties."

Victoire looked positively delighted at the prospect of staying at the palace. Laurent, however, seemed less affected. His forehead was creased, and while he bowed to the king and queen, it seemed his mind lay elsewhere.

The king and queen stayed for a while longer, inquiring about Gerald's journey. He made sure to convey his gratitude for Sybil, that without her he wouldn't be here, so the monarchs wouldn't regard her with suspicion. Both Tyrell and Ingrid refrained from asking why she wore the veil, but they certainly would have misgivings hosting a stranger.

"All of you must be exhausted from the journey, so we shall take leave and let you rest," Tyrell said, finally. "Do join us for dinner later."

"Iliana is taking dance lessons at the moment, but she'll be glad to see you," Ingrid said, smiling at Gerald.

Sybil declined the invitation with polite but firm courtesy. Gerald understood. She couldn't eat without revealing part of her face, and no matter how carefully she ate, the scales would be visible. Tyrell and Ingrid encouraged her to come, but also seemed relieved when she remained adamant.

More blue-uniformed servants appeared to take them to their rooms. Sybil was to share her room with Victoire on a floor beneath Gerald's suite, which was next to the twins' suite. Gerald invited Laurent to room with him (there were two bedrooms in the suite), but the steward declined with the same firmness Sybil had shown earlier.

"It's no hardship for me to stay at the servants' quarters, Your Highness," he said. "Please—I'd feel easier than living at a grand place like yours."

Once Laurent disappeared, led by another servant, Enzo closed the door and Ethan bounced in front of Gerald with eager eyes.

"Why does Lady Alma wear that veil, even in front of the king and queen?"

"What does she look like?" Enzo placed a hand on his chest. "I know! She's so dazzling that she has to wear a veil in case everyone are turned into stuttering fools. Like how you wear these spectacles."

“On the contrary, she is severely disfigured.” Gerald used a fabrication he had made up with Sybil. “She suffered burns on her face when she tried to rescue a child from a building on fire.” He was concerned that Sybil’s curse would create a stir in Arksar, and she certainly didn’t need the attention. Just like Theo hadn’t bothered to proclaim to the entire kingdom about the trolls underground. No need to spread panic and fear.

Enzo’s shoulders sagged; Ethan looked on the ground. “Pity,” Enzo finally said. “And here we were thinking she’d be a good match for you.”

Gerald decided it best to change the subject. After all, finding Urdu was the main reason they were here. “Where’s Freja?”

“No idea,” the twins chorused in unison.

“She might arrive on Iliana’s birthday,” Enzo said.

“She’s busy concocting the spell,” Ethan said solemnly. “And remember what she said about protecting the king from some crazy witch? No wonder she doesn’t want anyone bothering her.”

“We thought we had it worst when we were under the curse, but these mages have it pretty rough as well.” The twins had shed their normally perky expressions and were unusually serious. “I can understand why mages don’t want to let others know about their identities. All these life-threatening risks—it’s stressful.”

Gerald looked around the room. Like the exterior of the palace, it was white. White walls, white curtains, and a white fur rug on the floor. There wasn’t much furniture—Arksans detested clutter—but what existed was simple, practical, and looked like it would last for a long time. It was nice but so...foreign.

Somehow he thought about Sybil’s manor. About the books lying on tables and chairs, the table creaking with dishes, and his guest room, a little messy but inviting.

“What are we going to do after Iliana’s birthday?” he asked.

Ethan shrugged. “Have a grand tour around Linberg?”

Enzo elbowed his twin. “We can’t be lazing around for too long. We should wait for Freja’s signal—she’ll know what’s best to do.”

“But Freja’s busy at the moment. We can’t do anything, now that all three tracking spells have led us to dead ends.”

Tracking spell. Wasn’t he helping Sybil create one a few weeks earlier? It went well, except it was lacking one key ingredient: something that once belonged to the mage.

“Actually.” Gerald stood up. “We can still search for Urdu. I just remembered it’s possible to create a fourth tracking spell.”

CHAPTER 23

Sybil told herself not to mind the curious stares as she went up to Gerald's suite. Perhaps she ought to have refused the queen's invitation and sought lodgings in the city. But then, if the city's inns were packed due to Iliana's birthday, it might take hours before two rooms were procured, and it was nearly evening. Besides, with her veil she was bound to attract attention wherever she went, palace or not.

The room she was assigned to was nice. Spacious, clean and comfortable, if not lacking in ornaments and draperies. Victoire threw herself on the bed and declared she was exhausted.

"Mind if I stay here?" she asked with a giant yawn. "Call me if you need me."

Two people emerged from Gerald's suite just when she reached the landing. Gerald's brothers—the twins he had been talking about. Heart hammering in her chest, Sybil shrank behind the wall and was relieved to see the golden-haired duo head in the other direction. She had read appreciation in their eyes, but that was because they hadn't seen her real face.

Praying that Gerald was alone, Sybil went on to his suite and knocked on the door. He opened it, and a smile spread across his face. He was in a good mood. She wondered if it had to do with the mage, or if he simply was happy to be reunited with his brothers.

"Come in."

His suite was significantly larger, but the furnishings were similar.

"The servants brought a pot of hot tea. Would you like a cup?"

Sybil nodded, finding that she was rather thirsty. The servants hadn't brought anything to her room.

He pressed a steaming cup into her hands. Sybil removed her veil and mask—it was stifling under two layers—and took a sip of tea. "Is Freja at the palace?"

"Not yet." Gerald poured a cup for himself as well and sat across her with ease. It almost was like they were back in the manor, sitting down with a pot of hot chocolate, and discussing books. "But the twins said she might come around for Iliana's birthday."

"When is it?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Sybil laid down her cup. "What about Urdu? Have your brothers found anything about him?"

"Their compasses were dead ends as well. But I've just thought of something." Gerald looked at her with excitement. "Remember the ring Urdu gave to Annalisa? That's an important object that he fashioned. We can use it to create another tracking spell."

Sybil couldn't match his enthusiasm. "The ring was given to her forty years ago. Even if we can create a tracking spell from it, the location will hardly be the place where he was last sighted."

"It's a clue, nevertheless." Gerald wasn't affected by her rational, but pessimistic comment. "We must try every way imaginable, even if success seems impossible. Tell me, Sybil, would you give up now that you know Annalisa's ring could be another lead?"

His eyes were shining; she felt herself drawn to it like a moth to light. Would she give up? She had given up trying to seduce another man to break the curse. But she had been through twenty-eight rejections in forty-two years. They had only started searching for Urdu.

"How are you going to ask Annalisa for the ring?"

"I was writing when you knocked." He gestured at a smaller room that looked like an office. "On official letter paper stamped with the royal heraldry. I'll offer to compensate Annalisa. She knows your predicament, and the ring is of no use to her now. She's unlikely to refuse."

"All right." She didn't think Annalisa would refuse, but the issue was whether the tracking spell would succeed. Whether they'd end up with another dead end. "Are you going to send it now?"

“It’s getting late, but I’ll give the messenger a generous tip. If he can’t leave the city today, he can do it at the crack of dawn tomorrow.” Gerald went to the office and returned with an envelope. “Would you like to come with me?”

At that moment, another knock came on the door. Sybil expected it would be Gerald’s brothers, but to her surprise, a young woman stood in the entrance. Silvery-blond hair cascaded down her dress like a sheet of shimmering silk. Baby-blue eyes widened at the sight of Sybil in her veil. She bore a resemblance to the queen—this had to be Iliana.

“Your Highness.” Gerald came toward the young woman, who immediately flushed and looked anywhere except his face. “I must thank you for your invitation. The palace is beautiful, and I’m honored to be here.”

A sound came from Iliana’s throat. She clenched her fists and tried again.

“Pardon?” Gerald frowned.

“She said ‘the pleasure is all mine,’” Sybil said. She pointed to her ears, indicating she had superior hearing, because she was a beast. As annoying as it was, she had to admit being a beast had advantages. Such as hunting. And listening to a painfully shy young woman speak.

Iliana glanced at her with an inquisitive eye.

“This is Lady Alma, a friend of mine,” Gerald said. “She has spent most of her life living in the northeast region of Savony. When she learned I was traveling to Linberg, she expressed an interest to come with me. She has always been curious to visit the city.”

“Please forgive this, Your Highness, that I dare not reveal my face,” Sybil said, trying to speak as gently as possible. Iliana looked almost scared. “When I was a child, I was unfortunately trapped in a house on fire. So many scars I have that I prefer not to show them in public, lest others would be too shocked to speak.”

Understanding dawned on Iliana’s pretty face, followed by compassion.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “You are most welcome in the palace, Lady Alma. Will you—” she darted another fleeting glance at Gerald, as if it hurt to look at him “—will you and Prince Gerald please join us for dinner?”

“Thank you, but I must decline. I’m sure you understand.” Sybil pointed at her veil.

Iliana nodded and glanced at Gerald, who was still looking bemused. He probably didn’t hear Iliana’s invitation, because her voice was so low.

Sybil cleared her throat. “His Highness will be delighted to accept your invitation for dinner.”

Gerald sent her a mildly irritated look, as if blaming her for speaking on his behalf. But he didn’t say anything to refute her words. As a guest, he couldn’t refuse a royal invitation without good reason.

Sybil didn’t know why she said it, instead of repeating Iliana’s question for Gerald and letting him answer for himself. Was it compassion? She sensed that Iliana fancied Gerald; why not lend a hand to the young girl, who was obviously too bashful to speak clearly? Or was she doing a good turn for her kingdom? Since Theo was already engaged to another, Savony could still form a marriage alliance with Arksar through Gerald.

“Good evening.” She swept a graceful curtsy at the princess and went back to her room.

* * *

LAURENT DROPPED by her room the next morning. Sybil had finished breakfast and was putting on her mask and veil, when he came and told her he wanted to go into the city.

“You’d think me a fool, but I’d like to visit my relatives, milady. My brother is dead and my nephew doesn’t know me well. He was only eleven when your father employed me. He won’t be able to recognize me, after forty-two years, but I’d like to see him and my great nephews, and great-great nephews, if they’re all in the city.”

“Of course. It’s not foolish at all. But when you see your nephew, how will you present yourself?”

“I’ll say I’m a twice-removed cousin who grew up in Savony,” Laurent said calmly. She wouldn’t worry about him; despite having lived in Savony for decades, his precise Arksan nature remained. “I will be back before five. If anything unexpected holds me up, I will send a message to the palace.”

“Very well.” On a sudden idea, she called him back. “Wait for me. I’m going with you. I want to visit the city too.”

“I want to go too!” Victoire piped up. She was folding away their nightgowns in a corner.

Sybil hailed a palace servant and asked him to carry a message to Gerald, in case he worried where they had all gone to. Within minutes, the prince himself appeared. His hair was rumpled and his shirt wrinkled, as if he dressed in a hurry. One of his very few faults—he wasn’t an early riser.

“Where are you going in the city?” There was a puzzled note in his tone. As if he couldn’t imagine why she didn’t want to stay in the palace.

“Book browsing,” Sybil said, checking her bag and making sure she had enough coin in her purse. “And possibly book shopping.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Your library doesn’t have space for more books.”

“You haven’t seen the secret archives.”

More eyebrow-raising, followed by that mildly irritated look he gave her yesterday, when she told Iliana he’d be attending dinner. “You never showed me.”

“There wasn’t an opportunity at the time.” She shrugged into a heavy cloak. “Laurent and Victoire are waiting for me.”

“Iliana offered to show me around the palace today.” He took a step closer. “Why not leave your book shopping until tomorrow? You can come with me for the palace tour, and we can go to the bookstores tomorrow.”

“I’d rather not.” If she went on the tour, she’d have to endure courtiers gawking at her veil. And Iliana trying to get up the courage to speak to Gerald. Sybil wasn’t eager to play matchmaker again.

“It would be nice if we visit the bookstores together. There’s a lot of new Arksan literature that neither of us have read. We could pester the owners for recommendations, and after that, we could find a cozy eatery to read and argue over what we bought.”

The picture he painted was tempting. She had a strong desire to accept. And yet, while he imagined they would have fun, Sybil foresaw trouble. People staring at them walking together, gossiping about what the extraordinarily handsome prince was doing with a creepy veiled woman.

“You’re forgetting this.” She pointed at her veil. “Until Freja can do something about it, it’s best that I stay away from people.” Seeing the

crestfallen expression in his eyes, she added, more gently, “If I find anything interesting, I’ll buy you an extra copy.”

He let her leave, but she could read the unwillingness in his eyes. Was it possible that he felt more than friendship toward her? But he had seen her face. He knew what she looked like.

Impossible. It had to be the prospect of book shopping. She wasn’t going to allow herself be deluded.

* * *

HALF AN HOUR LATER, Sybil walked into a large bookstore filled with leather-bound volumes, Victoire following close behind. Unlike most stores, there was no fireplace, due to the risk of the books being destroyed by fire, but it was warm enough that she was sweating under her veil. There must be multiple heating spells at work.

Earlier they had dropped off Laurent at a house on the other side of the city. Luckily his nephew was still living at his brother’s house, and there was an evident resemblance between uncle and nephew, though the latter was a head taller. With tears in his eyes, Laurent turned and told them he would return to the palace on his own, then went inside with his nephew.

The bookstore owner was a placid old man who didn’t seem much affected by Sybil’s veil. Perhaps he was old enough to have met a score of people weirder than she. He pointed out books by her favorite Arksan authors, and recommended similar works that were published in the last decade.

Sybil browsed to her heart’s content. A few customers cast her curious, wary glances, but she ignored them. It was so long since she entered a bookstore.

An hour later she emerged from the bookstore, flushed and satisfied. Sybil had kept her promise to Gerald and bought a few duplicate copies for him. The owner gave her an old, worn sack that was used to hold apples; otherwise, the normal brown paper package would burst. Sybil didn’t mind, and even hid a smile when the owner asked if she had some lad to help her carry the books. With one hand, she easily hefted the bag as if it contained cotton, and left the store.

“I’ll tell the carriage to drive up,” Victoire said. “Just wait here, milady.”

Sybil stood and waited. A few people in the streets stared at her, but as long as she didn’t meet them eye to eye, they soon looked away and hurried along their way. It was normal that her veil would attract attention. It was cold enough that most Arksans had scarves wound around their faces, but none wore a veil that covered the entire face.

Yet, despite knowing that people would stare, she had a feeling that someone was watching her.

Sybil looked in the direction where the person was watching. A flash of black. She blinked, and the person was no longer there. Weird. She could’ve sworn there was someone leaning against the wall of a hat shop. Sybil ran to the shop and looked around, but she didn’t see anyone wearing black.

“Milady!” The carriage rolled into sight, and Victoire was waving at her from the window. “Over here!”

Sybil got in the carriage. As she settled in the seat, Victoire gave her a questioning look. “Why didn’t you stay at the same spot? I had to drive up farther to find you.”

“I found the hat shop interesting and wanted a look.” Sybil shrugged, deciding to put her suspicions away. Even if someone was watching her, it shouldn’t be anything to worry about. Perhaps it was her imagination, after all.

CHAPTER 24

Sybil took the plate Victoire handed her. It was piled high with grilled deer, baked salmon, roasted potatoes and broccoli with cheese melting on top. Arksan food wasn't as sophisticated as Savon cooking, but she wasn't complaining. She knew she was fortunate to stay in the Arksan palace as a guest. Some nobles who traveled from other cities to attend Iliana's party had to find inns or stay with relatives.

"Thank you." Sybil dug in. As a beast, her appetite was also larger than a normal human female.

Victoire grinned and set a second plate on the table. "Here's a piece of Iliana's birthday cake. You should have seen it before she cut it—the thing is five tiers high and covered with pink-and-white roses. Made by Masaro chefs, of course."

Sybil took a bite of cake. Raspberry filling tucked inside decadent chocolate layers melted in her mouth. The rose frosting was light and airy, complementing the richness of chocolate. Masaros *are* the best when it came to desserts. Even Margot acknowledged that.

It was the first day of Iliana's birthday celebration. Sybil stayed in her room, as she couldn't have anyone seeing her face while she ate. The celebration was held in a huge dining room on the first floor. Even while she was situated on the fifth floor, which was only one level beneath the servants' quarters, she could hear faint noises of music and revelry, thanks to her superior hearing.

What was Gerald doing? Escorting Iliana, resplendent in her birthday gown, or surrounded by fawning women? Possibly both.

"Prince Gerald's besieged with women. And men."

Was that any surprise?

Sybil dug her spoon in the cake and took a huge mouthful. Of course he'd be surrounded. He had the reputation as Savony's most handsome man, plus he was the second eldest prince. But it was Iliana's birthday—she should be the focus of everyone's attention. Although, considering how shy Iliana was, the princess probably wouldn't have minded being overshadowed.

She finished the cake in silence. Going to the window, Sybil looked outside. From the fifth floor, she had an excellent view of the grounds below. Behind the palace was a large ice rink, and dozens of Arksans were skating. They whizzed on the ice, their grins stretching their faces wider, and even those who slipped and fell were laughing.

She had learned how to skate when she was a child. But that was decades ago, and she hadn't skated since. She had tried many things—painting, playing the harp, dancing, even cooking—but only reading became a lifelong habit. And hunting, but that was more out of necessity.

Sybil sighed. When could she participate in public activities?

On the edge of the rink she noticed several uniformed guards, screening the people who came for the skating. One guard was checking people for invitations, while another was asking people to open their bags. One dropped a long, narrow object into a wooden chest.

"What are they doing?" Sybil said.

"They're making sure no one suspicious comes in," Laurent said, appearing in the entrance. Victoire hastened to close the door, as Sybil wasn't wearing her mask and veil. "The king and queen want to make sure no one will be harming Princess Iliana. Her birthday today has attracted people in the city, and there are guests arriving both domestically and from abroad."

"But Princess Iliana's staying in the palace," Victoire said. "There're dozens of guards around. It's not as if she's traveling alone in another kingdom."

"King Tyrell has been uncommonly protective of his daughter since his first child died," Laurent said.

Victoire gasped. "I never knew that! I thought she was an only child."

"He had a son called Alrik," Laurent said. "When Alrik was a month old, he was cursed by a witch and later died. Tyrell is fearful that the witch might have designs on his second child, so he keeps her in the palace most

of the time. Last year, when Prince Theo invited her to visit Savony, everyone was surprised that he allowed her travel abroad. My nephew speculated that the king wanted Iliana to make a match with one of the Savon princes, so he gave her leave to go."

They watched the skaters for a while. Most were parents with children ranging from five to fifteen. There were young couples as well, screaming and shrieking as they crashed into each other and fell on the ice, laughing. Around the rink, in the four corners, sat four marble pillars about three feet high. Each pillar had a flat surface on top, and an ice sculpture of a deer sat on the surface.

Not a bad way to spend a cold winter day.

"Is this a royal custom?" Sybil asked. "To have a skating party on the princess's birthday?"

"I'm not sure, milady," Laurent said. "I came to your manor when I was young, and never remembered if this was a custom."

"It looks like so much fun." Victoire stared at the skaters with longing.

"Go if you want," Sybil said. "I'm sure that they will let you in."

"I can't leave you here alone, milady. Besides, I don't know how to skate." She grinned. "Unless there's a handsome lad to teach me."

Sybil turned away from the window and looked at the table near her bed. There lay one of the books she purchased at the bookstore. Gerald also had a copy, though with the celebration going on, she doubted he had the time to read.

She could spend the rest of the afternoon curled up in bed with the book.

A tempting thought, but another thought took root. Inside the drawer of the same table was a small gift she had purchased for Iliana. She might prefer to shun crowds, but she was aware that staying at the palace was a privilege, especially when she was a stranger to the royal family. It would do well to express courtesy with a gift. Moreover, she rather liked Iliana. She sympathized with the girl, and unlike her, Iliana had to appear in the public eye whether she liked it or not.

"I should go the banquet," Sybil said. By this time, the guests should have eaten their fill and given their birthday wishes to Iliana. She could probably sneak up to the princess, say a quick word, and sneak back to her room. "I have to give Iliana a birthday gift."

“Milady, you don’t have to do this,” Victoire immediately said. “Laurent and I can pass along the present to the princess and let her know you caught a cold in the city. Or Prince Gerald can pass along the gift for you.”

“I can’t keep hiding all the time,” Sybil said, her pride returning. Yes, she loathed people staring at her veil, but on the other hand, she couldn’t blame them. A veiled figure who never revealed her face was bound to arouse suspicion. “It will only take a few minutes. Be so good as to help me locate the princess, so fewer people will notice me lurking.”

Laurent looked like he wanted to protest, but all he did was walk silently to the door. He knew better than to argue with Sybil.

She went down the stairs, patting her veil and hennin, making sure they were firmly secured.

In the dining hall, the five-tier cake was reduced to pieces. Servants were clearing away dishes and moving tables and chairs out of the main hall. A moment of panic seized her—was Iliana outside already? How was she to approach the princess if she was skating in the rink?

“Milady!” Victoire hissed in her ear. “Over there!”

Sybil turned; Laurent was standing in the entrance to another room, and pointing in through the doorway. She went and found Gerald and Iliana in the room, conversing in low tones.

Gerald’s tone was low, but Iliana’s was even lower. Sybil hovered in the entrance, toying with the idea of asking Laurent to let her know when Gerald finished talking to Iliana, but then the prince looked up. A smile alighted his lips and he said something to Iliana, who also looked in her direction.

Feeling like she was an intruder, Sybil turned on her heel, but her name was spoken.

“Alma.” Footsteps headed in her direction. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine. Absolutely fine.” *Pretend nothing happened. Pretend that Gerald and Iliana didn’t make a gorgeous couple*. Sybil tightened the grip on the package in her hands and lifted her chin. “I wanted to give the princess a present for her birthday.”

“That’s nice of you,” he said, smiling. “You’ve come at the right moment.” To her surprise, he caught her wrist and led her to the Arksan princess, who wore a polite but puzzled expression.

“Your Highness.” Sybil dipped in a graceful curtsy, glad that while her face was beastly, her posture could rival a dancer. She held out her package wrapped in scented paper. “Pardon me that this isn’t a costly gift, but the sentiment is genuine. Happy birthday.”

Iliana, to her credit, didn’t flinch. “Thank you, Lady Alma.” She didn’t say anything about regretting Sybil wasn’t there, and for that Sybil was glad.

“Would you like to unwrap it?”

Iliana did, and her eyes brightened as a golden comb studded with tiny flowers was revealed. Sybil didn’t bring much money for the trip and considered herself lucky to get the comb on a bargain. There were times when her creepy appearance was an advantage.

“It’s lovely.” She carefully wrapped the comb in the paper and hailed a servant. “Please take this to my room.”

Sybil smiled under her veil. There, that wasn’t difficult.

“Have you skated before?” Gerald suddenly said.

“Not for thirty...not for a long time,” Sybil said, seeing that Iliana was returning after passing the comb to a servant.

“Would it be all right to have Lady Alma skate with us?”

Iliana looked surprised, but she nodded. “Of course.”

“I can’t,” Sybil said. Not that she was against skating, but she dreaded the crowd. “Thank you for the invitation, but I can’t go.”

“The veil. I know.” Gerald laid a hand on her arm, preventing her from trying to slip away unnoticed. “But this one is different. We’re going to a private rink, which is exclusive for the princess and a few close friends. It’s right in the gardens, surrounded by hedges.”

“There are guards,” Iliana said, with a sympathetic glance at her veil. “They are stationed around the rink. No one else will come in.”

Sybil hesitated.

“Come with us, Sybil. Just for a short while, and I promise I’ll let you go back to being anonymous and mysterious.”

No woman could resist Gerald when he looked at her with pleading eyes. “All right, but just for a while.”

The smile on his face was so dazzling that she looked away, catching Iliana’s eye. For a moment, Sybil thought she read regret in the princess’s eyes. But surely Iliana couldn’t regard her as a rival for Gerald’s affections. Still—

Sybil drew back. “I’ll follow you.”

Gerald was silent for a moment, before offering Iliana his arm. It took a complicated series of twists and turns until they reached the private rink.

Sybil saw at one glance the rink was just as large as the one behind the palace, but had less than ten people. Guards dressed in dark green or blue blended in with the hedges and trees surrounding the rink.

“Your Highness!” A well-dressed young man skated toward them, his eyes on Iliana. “May I escort you around the rink?”

Iliana stole a quick glance at Gerald, who wore a polite smile and didn’t seem to mind that another man was paying attention to the princess. Iliana looked a little disappointed, but laid her hand in the crook of the man’s arm, allowing him to tow her across the rink.

A servant brought several pairs of skates. Sybil tried them on, careful to keep her clawed feet safely tucked in her heavy woolen stockings. Her feet fit the largest pair (to her embarrassment), and then she tried to stand. There was a low wall surrounding the rink. She held on the wall, trying to think of her childhood, when she used to skate as if she were flying. But this time her beastly characteristics failed her. She could hear well, smell well, see far, but she lacked the ability to remain balanced on blades.

On the other side of the rink, Iliana was skating gracefully, her blond hair braided on top of her head. The other skaters, all male, were trying to keep as near to the princess without being offensive.

A hand grasped her elbow. “Here,” Gerald said, leading her as she slowly made her way round the rink. “Let me help you. Hold on to me if you feel like you’re going to tumble.”

His blond hair was windblown, his shirt creased, but he was mindbogglingly gorgeous. His eyes sparkled and his cheeks glowed—exercise brought a radiance that made him too beautiful to gaze at.

She was a fool. She was falling for him, no matter how she wanted to deny it. She should push him away, or he could easily break her heart.

Don’t be stupid, Sybil. Get away while you can.

But this time the irrational side of her won out. As she skated round and round, finding that she was improving, she told herself that this was an exception. Next time if there was an invitation, she’d gather her defenses and say no, even if Gerald pleaded and begged.

“Who’s that?” someone called. “Why’s she skating with the prince?”

Sybil lost her balance, startled. When she landed on the ice, her hennin slipped from her head. A cool breeze over her head indicated her horns must be revealed. In plain sight, when there were guards around the rink.

Gerald gasped.

CHAPTER 25

For a split second, Sybil froze. Her hands went to her head with a cry.

Strong arms circled her, pulling her against a hard, muscled chest, and her face was pressed into Gerald's velvet tunic. He shielded her with his cloak, covering her horns.

"Hurry," he whispered. "Put on your hennin before they see you."

Her fingers were trembling. The hennin slipped and it took her a moment before she could fasten the headgear securely on her head. He helped her, his fingers brushing her dark hair and adjusting the headgear, and she was consumed with a secret desire to stay in his arms.

"Is she all right?" Iliana broke free from her admirers and skated toward them.

"She'll be fine." Gerald held up a hand as if Iliana was going to harm Sybil. The princess looked at him, eyes wide and slightly hurt. Quickly, he softened his tone. "I'm taking her back to the palace, Your Highness. I'm afraid Alma has sprained her ankle."

Sybil's hand paused on her hair. Her ankle was fine.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I needed an excuse."

"Is Lady Alma injured?" The twins glided across the ice toward them. They might be terrible at flirting, but they were naturals at sports. "Need a hand getting her back to the palace?"

"I'll do it," Gerald said firmly. She knew he didn't want to risk others discovering her true face, but still, heat bloomed in her cheeks. His arm stayed around her back in a protective hold. Like she belonged to him.

Coming to your rescue doesn't mean anything, Sybil. He would have done the same for anyone.

Gerald placed a hand under Sybil's elbow and helped her to her feet. She managed a convincing sway and limped in the direction of the palace. He gave Iliana and the others an apologetic wave, then hurried to catch up with her.

"You don't have to accompany me," she said in a low voice. Pride compelled her to speak the words. "You know I'm perfectly fine."

"Fine enough to keep skating?"

"You know what I meant." She shook her head, making a tiny noise of frustration. "Now Iliana might have the wrong impression." She was certain that the Arksan princess harbored a fancy for Gerald.

He furrowed his brow. "I have no idea what you're referring to."

A few children from the main rink appeared, laughing and chattering. One young girl stared at them. Sybil made a false stumble; he wound his arm around her waist.

When the children were gone, he spoke with amusement in his tone. "You're doing awfully well in pretending your foot is in pain."

"I had no choice," she said icily. "It was your idea to claim I was injured."

He sighed. Instantly she felt contrite. He was only trying to help.

"Thank you," she whispered, though she stared resolutely ahead.

"What?"

"Thank you for shielding me when my headgear fell off."

His arm tightened a little around her body. "I'm glad I was there."

"There's something that has been bothering me," she confessed, feeling it necessary to change the subject. "When I went to the bookstores yesterday, I had the feeling that someone was watching me."

"Do you know who?"

"No. In fact, I couldn't be sure if the person was watching me because he was under orders, or if it was simply because of my veil. Lots of people in the streets were gawking at me."

"Let's hope it's the latter," Gerald said, frowning. "Promise me you'll let me know if anything unsettles you."

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

“Nothing.” Sybil wanted to tell him that he had to stop caring for her, stop looking at her with concern in his eyes. She needed him to keep distance, or she’d lose her heart to him.

Be strong, she told herself. *You had no problem rejecting dozens of suitors. Stop yearning for what is impossible.*

* * *

“WHAT IS it between you and Lady Alma?” the twins said in unison. They had bounced into his room bright and early in the morning, when Gerald was just getting dressed. Fortunately they chose a time and place where Sybil wasn’t present, or she’d have skewered them both with her lethal glare.

Gerald pulled on his tunic. “We’re just friends.”

“Something’s going on between them,” Ethan said with a triumphant grin.

“Yeah, ‘just friends’ always means the opposite.” Enzo winked. “Don’t give us that bland, innocent expression, old bro. Did you know how you looked when she tripped on ice yesterday?”

“Like she was going to be attacked by a pack of wolves.”

“Enormous, vicious, saliva-dripping wolves.”

“You’re making us die of curiosity,” Ethan said. “No offense, brother, but she doesn’t seem the most friendly person around, and she’s disfigured.”

Irritation rose in his mind. *She isn’t disfigured; she’s cursed. If you saw what she truly looked like, you both would be head over heels.*

He remembered how the twins fawned over Lady Sybil’s portrait in the gallery. And then an unfamiliar, undesirable emotion came over him. Suppose the curse was broken and Sybil regained her dazzling beauty? She’d be surrounded by eager admirers, just as Iliana was at the private rink. It was selfish of him, but he’d rather *not* see her besieged by suitors.

“How about the lady? What does she feel about you?”

In his mind, Gerald ran through the time when he accompanied Sybil back to the palace. They would’ve reached it sooner if not for Sybil’s fake injury. Victoire came to meet them, a broad smile stretched across her

face. The smile grew wider when she saw Gerald's hand on Sybil's waist. Sybil realized where her maid was looking and gently pried his hand off.

Despite her cursed face, her figure had much to recommend itself—trim, but curvy in the right places. For a second, he wondered what it would be like to hold her, to make her let her guard down. A tantalizing thought, but he was certain he'd earn a vicious blow if he tried.

Gerald strongly suspected that Victoire had exaggerated her mistress's desire to skate. He wasn't a mind reader of young, flighty maids, but he was certain Victoire wanted to play matchmaker. He found that he didn't mind—he was amused, even—but what mattered was how Sybil felt. So far it seemed she wasn't open to the possibility.

"None of your business," he said shortly.

"He sounds like Theo," Ethan said in tones of awe. "When did our sweet, gentle Princess Gerald start behaving like a grouchy bear?"

Gerald had an urge to crack his knuckles.

"Oh no." Enzo put a hand to his heart, his expression filled with horror. "Did she turn you down, dear brother?"

"Impossible. *No one* says no to the flower of our family."

"She's deranged. Blind. Or both."

This time Gerald *did* crack his knuckles. "Out," he said, eyes flashing. "If you don't leave this instant, I'll toss you into the corridor."

The twins left, whining and lamenting that "Princess Gerald" was transformed into a vicious dragon.

Gerald shut the door with an audible thud. He sat on the bed and ran a hand through his hair, unable to stay calm. Next to the bed was a small table. Two newly purchased books sat upon it—Sybil was true to her word and bought copies for him. But at the moment he didn't feel like reading anything.

He wasn't even sure what he felt for Sybil at the moment. Friendship? More than friendship? She was the most extraordinary woman he ever met, that was for sure. But she seemed reluctant to offer friendship—she didn't even want to go book-shopping with him, even if they shared similar literary tastes. He wanted to get to know her, but she pushed him away. Was it because she was too self-conscious about her looks? Or was it simply that she didn't value his company?

He wanted answers. But he couldn't ask the questions. Not yet.

Someone knocked on the door. Gerald sighed. It had better not to be the twins. And he was sure it wasn't Sybil.

Striding to the door, he flung it open. It was Iliana's nursemaid, a middle-aged woman named Linnet. He first met the woman when Iliana came to Savony on Theo's invitation. He didn't remember much about her, except that Linnet was constantly hovering over the princess like an overprotective mother hen.

"Madame." He offered her a short bow. "What can I do for you?"

"Mind if I come in?" she said. "I'd rather not discuss this in the corridor."

Bemused, Gerald stood aside to let her pass. "Of course."

Linnet crossed to the window and sat on the armchair. "How are you finding Linberg?"

"I haven't a chance to explore the city," he said cautiously. "But so far the palace has been welcoming."

"I suppose that means you're enjoying your stay?"

Not entirely, but he couldn't tell her about Sybil or the curse. "Of course. The king and queen have shown me great hospitality, and it has been an honor to be a guest here."

She nodded, like he had said the very words she wanted to hear. "Do you know there's a ball tomorrow night?"

Gerald did. Once he arrived at the palace, the steward informed him about the schedule for Iliana's birthday celebration. It was to last three days—the first one opened with the buffet and ice skating, the second with a feast, and the last day ending with a grand ball.

"Yes."

The older woman rose. "Ask the princess to open the ball with you."

"I'll certainly ask her for a dance."

She waved a hand impatiently. "Didn't you hear me? I want you to *open* the dance with her with everyone looking on. After the opening dance, everyone will be allowed to take to the floor."

"Why do you ask me? There are plenty of young men clamoring for the honor." He had seen how the men at the private skating rink were eager to gain Iliana's attention. Including his own brothers.

"And I thought you were intelligent." She wagged a long, bony finger at him. "Iliana fancies you. Since you're here as her guest, you might as well return the favor and ask her to dance."

Gerald blinked. He wasn't completely taken by surprise—he noticed she blushed furiously and stuttered when in his presence, but most girls did. Besides, Iliana was so shy that she behaved that way toward everyone except her parents and nursemaid. How was he to be certain she harbored a girlish fantasy about him?

"I...surely there is someone—some Arksan nobleman—who is better than I."

She scoffed. "Don't be daft. You're a prince, not to mention the man she's mooning over." Linnet glared at him, as if he should be ashamed for making Iliana unhappy. "If you have any ounce of human decency, you should go and ask the king if you may have the honor of requesting her hand..."

"Pardon me." Gerald held up a hand. "The princess and I have barely talked. I cannot offer marriage, even if it is for the benefit of an alliance."

She sniffed. "I meant that she could have the option of turning you down. That'd do her good after mooning for you."

Gerald put a hand on his head. "You want her to reject me, but at the same time, you're asking me to open the ball with her?"

"Just ask her," she snapped, going to the door.

As she went down the corridor, he could hear her muttering, "...a man who could pass for a lady if he wore a dress...don't know what she sees in him..."

Gerald rolled his eyes. Seemed that he couldn't avoid being compared to a woman, no matter where he went. No one knew that he could probably defeat any "real" man in combat, considering his vast experience dealing with trolls.

He went back to his room and shut the door. He should head downstairs and look for Iliana, but reluctance made his feet as heavy as lead. He wasn't averse to asking Iliana for a dance, but knowing her character and her fancy for him, he wasn't sure if opening the dance with her was a good idea.

Opening the ball signified a special meaning. If Iliana had the wrong idea—if she thought he reciprocated her feelings—imagine how devastated she'd be when he told her he saw her simply as a casual acquaintance. But if he didn't ask her, Linnet would be after him. In a way she reminded him of his aunt, Duchess Claudia. Both of them were headstrong and bullying. What differed was that Linnet had seemed benign

and harmless—a facade for the princess, he supposed. She had no problem transforming into a vulture when Iliana wasn't around.

What if he listened to her and asked Iliana to open the ball with him? Iliana was so shy—he hoped she wouldn't tremble while dancing. He might also buy a spell to enhance his hearing, because he knew he wouldn't be able to hear her speak in that tiny voice only mice could hear.

And then an image of Sybil, tall and imposing, silver eyes flashing, materialized in his mind. He wondered what it was like to dance with her—that is, if she would even consent to dance. She'd be graceful, poised, making pithy comments. But after the skating incident, no way would she dare to step onto the dance floor.

Another knock came on the door. Gerald let the person outside knock three times before he opened it. By this time he really didn't feel like facing anyone, unless it was Sybil coming to ask him for a trip to the bookstore. Fat chance of that happening.

But it was the messenger he sent to request for Annalisa's ring. The boy held out a small package.

"The charm you asked for, Your Highness."

Gerald opened the package. The ring was plain and worn, but at that moment it was the most beautiful piece of jewelry in his eyes. Closing his fist around the ring, he prayed that this time, the tracking spell would bring them to Urdu.

CHAPTER 26

Victoire held up a beautiful primrose yellow gown with puffed sleeves and intricate embroidery. “Milady, please. You need something to wear for the ball.”

“I’m not going.”

“But Princess Iliana sent you an invitation.”

“Victoire, have you forgotten what happened when I tried to skate yesterday?”

Victoire grinned. “Of course! Prince Gerald saved you! ‘Tis was better than I hoped.”

Sybil turned and glared at her maid. “What do you mean—better than you hoped?”

“Milady, he had his arm around you! He wouldn’t do that if he weren’t interested in you.”

“I was supposed to have an injury,” Sybil growled. “He was the one who came up with the idea. So he had to help me fake it.”

“That shows how much he cares for you!” Victoire clasped her hands together. “And he has seen you under the veil, milady. Really, you should consider going to the ball. We’re in Arksar. Laurent’s nephew can introduce us to the best stores for beauty spells, and they can...”

“Go wrong at the right moment,” Sybil said acidly. “My hennin flew off yesterday, even when I thought it was safe. I was fortunate that I was in a private rink, and Gerald was nearby. Do you want to imagine what the Arksans would think if they saw my horns? I’d be locked up and questioned.”

Victoire gave in. She laid the dress back in the trunk with a sigh. “I made the dress after the latest fashions in Savony.”

The disappointment she showed made Sybil rethink. “Wait. Victoire, perhaps we can...”

Someone knocked on the door. Sybil quickly patted both sides of her head, making sure the veil was secure, and nodded at Victoire. “Open the door.”

There, standing in the entrance, were two young men who looked exactly the same, from the shade of their blond hair to the twinkle in their eyes.

“Ethan and Enzo at your service, milady.” They bowed in unison. Even the angle of their bows were identical.

“What may I do for you?” Sybil asked with a hint of reserve. She couldn’t think of why they’d want to visit her. If Gerald wanted to see her, he’d come himself.

Ethan—or was it Enzo?—held out his arm. “We’re here to escort you to our brother’s suite.”

Victoire muffled a gasp with a hand. Sybil turned and shot her a glare.

“Is this about a book? Or a spell?”

One of them grinned. “Right to the point. My favorite kind of woman.”

The other offered his arm. “Please, let us bring you to his suite now, Lady Alma. He needs you.”

Sybil was suspicious about their behavior, but her curiosity got the better of her. Surely Gerald wasn’t planning on anything, such as more skating. Maybe he had found a spell that would protect her veil from flying off. Yes, that was more likely.

They went down to Gerald’s suite. The smell of mint permeated the room. The prince was bent over a cauldron (just how did he get ahold of one amidst the birthday celebrations?), stirring, and humming in a low voice. His spectacles were perched on his nose, but Sybil found him just as attractive. That focused, concentrated expression was what drew her to him. That, and knowing that he had started researching spells to save his brothers, to better equip them against the trolls. He had a heart as beautiful as his face.

Gerald looked up at the sound of their footsteps. A smile flashed across his face, and he gestured to a space near him. “Would you like to help me?”

She gave the table next to him a cursory glance. The mint needed to be crushed. So she grabbed the mortar and pestle and started working.

“Annalisa’s ring arrived?”

“Completely intact.” He resumed stirring. “We’re lucky that she didn’t mind giving it up.”

“She knew our problem.” Sybil crushed the mint. She checked that the pieces were even and emptied the mixture into a bowl. “She’s willing to help us locate someone strong enough to overpower that witch.”

She looked up, wondering if the twins had heard, but in the few seconds that she entered the room, they had disappeared noiselessly. Just what Victoire would do.

Sybil put them out of her mind. *Focus on the tracking spell*, she told herself. Stop thinking about the other way to break the curse. Now that the tracking spell could be produced, they had another grasp at hope, however small it was.

“About time.” Gerald emptied the mint into the cauldron and stirred. Sybil watched his movements, watched how the liquid turned from dark to light, from light to transparency. She knew from the grimoire that the spell was successful—up to this point. All that was left was the ring, which was lying on a clean white towel on the same table.

The cauldron liquid bubbled. Gerald dropped the ring into the liquid. Within minutes, after the steam had evaporated, the liquid turned thick, eventually congealing into a smooth paste. Gerald took a brush and dabbed some paste. He coated the tip of a compass and waited for it to change color. Sybil held her breath. Umber, brown, orange, or even yellow, if the mage was close by.

Nothing happened.

Gerald frowned and added more paste. The compass remained exactly the same. The tip was still silver, and it didn’t spin. Sybil poked it, but nothing made it change. They looked each other, and saw disappointment reflected in the other’s eyes.

“The spell failed.” Gerald’s tone was hesitant. “But the ring—Annalisa couldn’t have given us a replica or fake.”

“Perhaps the catalyst was too long ago.” Sybil looked at the ring lying in the cauldron. “The magic has long faded. It wasn’t enough to point out Urdu’s location.”

“Let’s try again.” Gerald rolled up his sleeves; Sybil envied him. Lucky that it was winter in Arksar. It was only in the safety of her manor that she could roll up her sleeves or wear short sleeves. Her claws, not to mention arms coated with fur, were enough to shock anyone.

They started over. Having worked in the manor over the tracking spell, they had no problem creating another. Gerald was the one who controlled the process, while Sybil acted as his assistant. She read his movements, did what was expected, and in no time the liquid was bubbling, clear and transparent.

“Excellent.” Gerald rubbed his forehead. “We work well together, Sybil.”

She flushed, glad he couldn’t see her through the veil. The color of her skin, anyway. But all she said was, “Don’t call me by my real name. Someone might hear, if you get used to it.”

Immediately he looked contrite. “You’re right. But let’s hope it won’t be long. When I learned who you are, you always seemed more like Sybil to me. Alma doesn’t suit you.”

She couldn’t help it; the corners of her mouth lifted. “The concoction is turning to paste.”

Gerald dipped the brush into the cauldron. Again, the paste was applied. Again, the compass remained the same. It didn’t change color, it didn’t spin. Sybil felt like hurling it against the wall.

“Shall we try again?” Gerald said. There was weariness in his eyes.

“I doubt it’ll make a difference.” Sybil sat on a chair. She wasn’t exhausted—she rarely got tired since she turned into a beast—but her mind was weary. “We followed the guidelines perfectly. There has to be something wrong with Annalisa’s ring. I don’t think the ingredients didn’t work.”

“I suspect the same.” Gerald sat down across from her. “We’ll have to wait until Freja arrives. I can’t see any other way to break your curse. Unless Urdu suddenly shows up at the ball.”

Sybil couldn’t help it; she giggled. Thank heavens, her giggle was nothing like a beast’s. It was silvery and tinkly, like crystal bells.

Gerald looked at her and smiled, as if he appreciated the sound. “You should laugh more.”

At that moment, someone knocked on the door. It was a maid, asking Gerald if he’d like to join the princess for lunch.

“The princess likes you,” Sybil said, without thinking. “You ought not refuse her hospitality.”

“She barely knows me.”

“Which is why she is using this chance to do that.”

“Compared to the princess, you and I share more in common.”

This was not what she expected. Her cheeks heated up. “This isn’t about me. And it’s not required to share much in common for a partner. My parents were opposites, yet they loved each other.”

Sybil rose. She went to the door, determined to leave. Not that she was afraid of him, but afraid that if she kept lingering in his presence, she’d fall even deeper in love with him.

“Sy...Alma.” Her hand was on the knob already. “Will you be at the ball tomorrow?”

“I think you can guess the answer. And no, whatever you say won’t make me change my decision.”

He let her go. But not before she heard a faint sigh of disappointment.

* * *

ON THE EVENING of the ball, Sybil stayed resolutely in her room, though she allowed Victoire to talk her into wearing the yellow dress. She even went so far as to apply a spell that Laurent purchased in the city, one that made the scales on her face become less visible, and the silver of her eyes fade into a more human gray.

When she looked into the mirror, she thought she looked almost normal. Arksan spells were certainly of a higher quality.

“Milady, are you certain you don’t want to go to the ball?” Victoire said for the umpteenth time. “You look good enough to go without the veil.”

Sybil fingered her cheek. Yes, the scales weren’t prominent, but traces definitely remained. In the ballroom, where numerous lights would be winking from the pillars and ceiling, everyone could see her face. She looked like she had suffered numerous scars.

“No,” she said firmly. “The scales haven’t completely disappeared. And even if they had, the spell might fail. I’m not in a position to take risks.”

Victoire looked like a child deprived of a jar of sweets. “I swear, milady, you look much better than any time we tried to fix you up before.”

Sybil didn’t refute her words. Perhaps she ought to be thankful that Moira’s magic was greatly diminished by Urdu, or she might have been transformed into a complete beast that bore no resemblance to a human. At least she looked all right with beauty spells.

Somewhere downstairs, music began to flow. Sybil didn’t want to imagine what Gerald was doing now. She heard from Victoire that he was going to open the ball with Iliana, and the significance wasn’t lost on her. Usually when a royal opened the ball with someone who wasn’t her father or brother, that someone had to be an important someone.

“I want a drink.”

If she couldn’t dance, she could at least enjoy a bottle of Arksan liquor. They weren’t famous for cuisine, but there was a special brand that found favor with Savons.

Victoire pursed her lips, but went off. Returning with a bottle, she poured Sybil a glass. The liquid was clear and amber.

“Go down and observe the ball if you’d like,” Sybil said, sensing her maid was bursting with curiosity. And besides, she wouldn’t mind a moment being alone. “You can watch the dancing and tell me about it.”

Victoire brightened.

“But whatever you do, *don’t* you dare disturb Prince Gerald. He is to be left alone. Is that clear?”

The intensity of her gaze and harshness in her tone seemed to work. Victoire’s shoulders drooped, promising she wouldn’t even get within a ten-feet distance of Gerald.

“He’ll be safe from me,” she assured Sybil.

After her maid was gone, Sybil settled herself on a chair near the window. She read, occasionally taking a sip from the bottle, while the sound of music and chatter drifted by. Normally, she hated crowds. But not even a chance to peek at the ball...she briefly thought about going out and sneaking just one glance.

But then her courage failed her, when she saw her hennin hanging on the wall. Precautions could fail.

Another knock on the door. Laurent, dressed in an unfamiliar suit, stood in the entrance.

“Milady.” He held out a bouquet of roses. They had to be grown in a conservatory with a heating spell; no roses would bloom in this weather. “These are for you.”

Thawed, Sybil took the bouquet and laid them on the table. “Thank you. How’s your nephew and his family?”

His ruddy face glowed. “In the beginning they were stiff, but when I told them stories about my brother, they started to see me more as family.” Laurent gave a strained smile. “I had to watch myself. I couldn’t give myself away, or they’d speculate about my age, but so far everything has been working well. One of my great-nephews is aspiring to become a palace guard; the other is looking for a job as a sailor.”

“Good.” She didn’t say much, but Laurent would understand. “Have you seen the ball?”

He launched into a precise—albeit dry—description. One hundred and twenty-seven guests in total. It opened at seven o’clock sharp. Prince Gerald opened the dance with Iliana, who was dressed completely in white and had five diamonds in her hair.

“How long will we stay here?” Laurent said. “The celebration ends tonight.”

Sybil thought for a while. Her pride was against staying, and she missed the “freedom” of being able to move around without her veil.

“I’d like to go home,” she admitted. “But the mage called Freja hasn’t shown up. We need a mage, Laurent. Or I can foresee another forty years in the manor.”

“I don’t mind,” Laurent said. “I wouldn’t mind spending more time with my family, but eventually they’d start wondering how I am able to stay away so long. I’ve told them I was on vacation, that I’m the son of Laurent and also acting as steward in the de la Roche manor.”

Sybil paced the room. “I’ll ask Gerald if it’s possible to send the mage a letter. We can describe our situation to the mage. Even if she is too busy to come, she may be able to tell us in written word what can be done.”

After Laurent went away, Sybil sat down again, a little more heavily. She reached for the bottle, not bothering to pour the liquor into the glass. She uncorked the bottle, and on an impulse, removed her veil. She was alone in her room, the door was locked, and it was a chore lifting the veil just to get a sip from the bottle.

Laurent had clearly exhibited a desire to spend more time with his nephew's family. Considering his real age—he would be eighty-five by now—he should be retired. He should be relaxing in a cozy house, playing with grandchildren. Not serving a woman who was going to live forever if she didn't break the curse placed on her head.

And Victoire. Because her maid had to stay with her, she remained almost as naive, innocent, and childlike, just like the seventeen-year-old she was forty-two years ago. Victoire ought to be married with children by now.

And Margot. And Bernardin. And the rest of her servants, living a monotonous, lonely, secluded life in the forest, unable to tell anyone of their secret, living every day with the same tedious routine. They deserved better. They should be freed from this stifling existence.

Sybil took another sip of wine, the taste burning her throat. She appreciated fine wine as any Savon, but she was never a heavy drinker. There were a few times when the thought of a bleak, endless future consumed her and she allowed alcohol to shroud her mind into oblivion, but those happened rarely. At this moment, with the sound of music drifting from below, she took solace in the comfort of numbing her mind.

Another knock on the door. Why wouldn't her servants leave her alone? It had to be Victoire with a report of the ball. Well, she wasn't interested at the moment. The merrier the ball, the more she'd be reminded that she couldn't participate.

The knock came again. Irritated, Sybil trudged to the door, with every intention of telling the person on the other side to go away, but then she froze.

Prince Gerald stood in the entrance. Dressed for the ball, he was breathtakingly stunning in his indigo tunic and leather boots. The dark colors complemented the ash blond of his hair, and his light blue eyes were gentle and filled with concern as he gazed at her. That was when she realized her veil was on the table.

Sybil snatched her veil, fumbling on the strings. Was it the vagueness in her head or was it the dismay at seeing him? Her fingers slipped, and the veil fluttered to the floor.

"Sybil, it's all right." He closed the door and came to her. "You don't have to put on the veil. It's just me."

She made a final effort and her claws tore the veil in half. Drat. Since there was no way to salvage it, she might as well pretend nothing happened. He already saw her face, anyway.

“Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

She gave a harsh, bitter laugh. It was nothing like the tinkling, crystal-bell laugh that she liked. “Why would you want to see this—” she ran a finger across her scales “—when you can see countless perfectly beautiful faces down there?”

“Are you drunk?” He sounded alarmed. “Give me that bottle.”

“No!” Sybil cradled the bottle against her chest and shook her head. “I can’t dance, I can’t go down to the ballroom, I can’t even go out without this veil. Don’t you dare deprive me of the one thing I have to drown out my sorrow.”

Gerald looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Sybil, put down the bottle. You’ll have a splitting headache tomorrow if you keep drinking.”

“That’s none of your concern.” She took another swig. That was when he seized the chance—he wrenched the bottle from her hands and put it behind his back.

“Give it back!”

“Can’t.”

“You thief!”

“Whatever you say.”

She lunged at him; he caught her wrist and swiftly grabbed her other arm. “Sybil, calm down.”

She struggled—she nearly shook him off, thanks to her enhanced strength, but he did something that took her by surprise.

He embraced her. His arms went around her, one hand wrapping firmly around her waist, while his other hand pressed her head on his shoulder. She wasn’t cold, but nevertheless she appreciated the warmth. He was solid, comforting, caring. As much as the rational side of her screamed against it, she stayed in his arms.

“If you want to dance,” he said gently, “then permit me the honor of joining you. I locked the door; the curtains are drawn. We can dance without the risk of anyone seeing you.”

Sympathy. Pity. That had to be why. He was a gentleman; he didn't want her feeling left out.

Nine cases out of ten, Sybil would have refused. Her pride would have rebelled; she wanted no one's pity. But the comforting embrace of his arms thawed her heart. There was a foggy side effect of the wine that crumbled the wall she built around her heart.

"I haven't danced in forty years."

He laughed. "I'll teach you." He retreated a step and threaded his fingers through hers. "Can you hear the music? There's the beat, one-two-three. One-two-three. That's it, forward, left, backward, right. Repeat after me."

Sybil tried to follow his instructions. She used to be good at dancing, but forty-two years had taken the rhythm from her feet. She stepped on his toes twice, apologizing. He told her not to worry. When she dared to stare into his eyes, she was surprised that she couldn't find any disgust or horror.

It had to be the spell that softened the contours of the scales. No one could stare at her beastly face without flinching.

"There." The music lulled; he bowed and smiled. "That wasn't too bad."

They stood staring at each other for an awkward moment. Sybil's heart raced; even her cynical mind couldn't deny he was gazing at her with appreciation.

"Yellow suits you." He glanced at the bouquet of roses lying on her bed. "Who gave you those flowers?"

"Laurent did. It was thoughtful of him." She clasped her hands together. "Aren't you going to return to the ballroom? They'll be missing you."

"I suppose." Gerald sighed, but he didn't move. "I spilled hot chocolate over my tunic, so I'd have an excuse to slip away and change. But changing clothes wouldn't require a large amount of time. Sooner or later, someone will come looking for me."

"You..." She swallowed. "You don't seem terribly eager to return."

"Not really. I know most men envy my position; they wouldn't mind being surrounded by multiple women. For example, the twins enjoy the attention. But I cannot take pleasure in the fawning attention of women I

don’t know, or barely know.” He looked at her, and heat broke out, radiating from her skin. “One is enough.”

Was he implying what she didn’t dare to dream of?

The new tracking spell had failed. Her servants were trapped. The mage was still occupied—the trolls were a far bigger threat. Sybil had vowed she’d never seduce a man again, but tonight, when everything else seemed hopeless, she couldn’t help wondering about the possibility.

Try it, her mind whispered. *He’s looking at you; he’s not intimidated by your face.*

“Marry me,” she said.

The shock in his eyes made her falter, but she made herself go on. “When everyone knows you’re a married man, the attention will decrease. We’re perfectly matched, we share much in common. Think about it—we can sit together and discuss books. We’ll add more books to the library. You can teach me more spells, and I can teach you how to hunt. It’ll be...”

“Sybil, are you asking me to marry you?”

She nodded. Dread and anxiety built in her mind. He didn’t look like she was insane for suggesting the idea, but neither did he seem happy about it.

“Sybil, I don’t understand. You’ve never acted like you wanted to be more than friends, and now you’re asking me to marry you?” He shook his head. “Impossible.”

It felt as if he ripped out her heart and threw it out of the window. Wasn’t she telling Victoire over and over again that she was setting herself up for rejection? Disappointment, humiliation, pain converged and swirled around her, making her wanting to crawl into a hole and hide there forever.

“Leave me,” she forced herself to say.

Something in her tone or look must have affected him; he was staring at her with widened eyes. “Sybil, what I meant...”

“Go!”

He went. When the door shut behind him, Sybil sank on the ground and covered her face in her hands. It wasn’t just the despair that she wasn’t able to break the curse. Of all the rejections she collected over the years, this cut the deepest.

She hated herself for being a fool. Even if he wasn’t put off by her face, she had never indicated she was interested in him romantically. By

the magi, she wasn’t even nice to him for most of the time. Of course he would refuse her.

What was she to do?

CHAPTER 27

Gerald stared at the ceiling. Hours had passed since he climbed into bed, and it was well past midnight when the ball ended. He should be exhausted. His feet ached, and his throat was a little sore, but he couldn't sleep. Since he returned to the ballroom after Sybil's shocking proposal, women had descended on him in droves. He must've danced with every woman in the ball, some more than once. Iliana had tried to engage him in conversation, but while he responded as courteously as possible, he was disinclined to ask questions. All he could think about was Sybil.

If someone were to ask him to list the top ten things that were impossible to happen, her proposing marriage would be top of the list. It was so abrupt, so improbable, that he wondered if she was acting under the influence of a spell. Maybe it was slipped into the bottle of wine. But no, it couldn't be. He didn't know of any spell that could make a lady full of pride blurt marriage proposals.

The picture she painted of their marriage life was perfect bliss. Books, hot chocolate, a fireplace. He wanted that, a quiet life tucked away from people who gawked at his face and clamored for his attention. But the way she came at him and proposed marriage unnerved him. He couldn't believe she was in love with him—she never acted like she cared for him more than a friend.

It wasn't because of her face. True, he *was* shocked when he first beheld her without her veil, but he had got used to her appearance. Perhaps it was because of the trolls. Having seen green-skinned, red-eyed creatures on a regular basis since he turned twelve, Gerald wasn't affected by

Sybil's cursed features. He didn't think he'd ever get tired of her company. Despite her curt behavior, he admired her—she was unlike any woman he'd met. Still, marriage had never crossed his mind.

On the other hand, if it weren't for the problem with trolls occupying his mind, there was a chance that he'd think of marriage eventually. He knew he felt strongly for her, and he did consider courting her, once she showed more warmth toward him.

When he finally rose in the morning and looked into the mirror, his eyes were bleary and red-rimmed. Stubble appeared on his chin. He only felt this way on the morning after a night fighting trolls. But he supposed no one would doubt his lack of sleep, since everyone would be sleep-deprived after the ball.

He didn't know how he'd face Sybil. Would she turn away once she saw him? He desperately hoped not. He considered seeking Victoire and asking about her mistress—perhaps ask what planted the idea of marriage into Sybil's head.

But just when he emerged from his room, Enzo and Ethan showed up. Both of them looked excited. Last night they had a fair share of Arksan ladies vying for their attentions.

"Guess what?" Ethan said, slinging an arm around Gerald's shoulders.

Gerald braced himself for a sudden announcement of an engagement. After what Sybil did yesterday, nothing could rattle him.

"Freja is here," Enzo said. "She wants to see us."

* * *

FREJA WAS WAITING for them in a private room. They had to go through a maze of corridors and stairways, through two locked doors, until they came to a small, windowless room. Gerald wasn't even sure if they were above the ground or in a basement room.

There, in the center of the room, Freja sat on a chair, sipping tea. She looked the same as when they last saw her, with graying hair and plain features, and wouldn't look out of place if she were a working woman—although Gerald secretly suspected the mage was using magic to conceal her real features. Disguising herself as an ordinary woman was the best way to keep anonymous.

“Lady.” Gerald bowed; the twins followed. “It is good to see you again.”

Freja gestured to the chairs around the table. “Have a seat.” She reached for the teapot. “Tea, anyone?”

They accepted. Gerald watched as Freja poured steaming liquid into three cups, and waited.

“How’s the countercurse going?” Enzo said, unable to control his patience.

“It’s slow, but so far I have not encountered any major problems. Thankfully. But without Urdu...” Freja knitted her brows together. “There is no chance we can succeed. I have laid the groundwork in the countercurse, but to actually make it work, I need the power of at least six other mages.”

“Can’t we find someone else?” Enzo said.

“Does it have to be that Urdu mage?” Ethan said.

“It doesn’t have to be him,” Freja said with a shrug. “However, I do not know of other mages who are powerful enough to collaborate with the countercurse. As you know, we mages prefer not to let others know of our existence, or everyone would be hounding us to take care of their problems. Besides, Urdu is the oldest and most powerful mage I have ever known. He is also the one who created the countercurse I speak of. He knows the inner workings of the spell. Without him, a small error can undo everything I created.”

“Which means...” Gerald said slowly. “Without Urdu, everything will be for naught.”

Freja nodded. “That is why I am here. My niece is watching the spell for me at the moment. I want a report of what you encountered when the compass no longer changed color. Claudia has already sent me hers in a letter.” Freja folded her arms. When she spoke, her tone carried a firm, commanding quality that made her sound like a powerful mage. “Tell me everything you saw. Perhaps there is still something else I can gather.”

“Ours isn’t much,” Enzo said. “When we got there, all we saw was a pile of ashes.”

Freja raised her eyebrows. “Did you ask the villagers who lived nearby?”

“Oh yes, there was a charming little milkmaid who said...”

“...she didn’t know anything about it, so we had to ask this beautiful young widow...”

“...who didn’t know anything either—she just moved there after her husband died—so we asked a peasant girl who has the prettiest eyes you ever saw, and...”

Freja snapped her fingers. What came out of the twins’ mouths became the sound of a donkey braying. Gerald hid a smile.

“If you cannot talk about anything worth mentioning—” Freja placed her hands on the table “—it is better not to say anything.”

Enzo hung his head. “Sorry. Well, we eventually heard from the village elder. He said there was a house standing there, but it burnt down several years ago.”

“Did he tell you who was living there before the house was burnt down?”

“A man who looked around fifty,” Ethan said. “Black hair, short whiskers, and spoke with a scratchy tone.”

Freja nodded. “That’s Urdu.” She asked a few more questions, but the twins weren’t able to offer any new information. It seemed that Urdu’s burning down his house was an evident sign that he didn’t wish to leave any tracks.

“How about you?” Freja said, directing her gaze toward Gerald. She was one of the few people who could look upon Gerald without a start and blush.

Gerald told his story. He told how the compass led them to Tybalt, and how they found Annalisa. When he mentioned Moira’s name, Freja’s brows drew together. Her hand shook, and a drop of tea leaked from the cup.

“Urdu saved that young woman from a witch called Moira?” she said.

“Yes. Because she failed to possess Annalisa’s body, she sought out another target. She wanted another beautiful woman that she could use. She came to Savony to find Sybil, and...”

“Sybil?” Ethan said.

“Lady Sybil de la Roche?” Enzo tilted his head. “You address her as if she were your friend.”

Gerald ignored them. He suddenly realized that there was one thing he could do for Sybil. “Lady.” He leaned forward. “Before we broke the curse of the trolls, you were able to remove the silencing charm that prevented

us from speaking about the curse. Could you do the same for a friend of mine?”

Freja looked surprised. “You know someone else who’s cursed?”

“Yes. She’s at the palace at this moment.”

The mage frowned. “I can’t promise anything. But you can bring her and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Who is it?” the twins said in unison. Gerald didn’t reply; he went to the door. There were two palace guards standing outside, though they were yawning. When they saw Gerald, they immediately straightened with guilty expressions.

“Please bring Lady Alma to this room,” Gerald said. One palace guard saluted and headed out, leaving the other guard in place. For a second, Gerald thought he saw a flash of white in the far end of the corridor, but when he focused, the corridor was empty.

When he looked back, he wasn’t surprised to see two blond heads peeking out of the doorway.

“So it IS Lady Alma,” Ethan said.

“We just knew it had to be her,” Enzo said. He held up his palm; Ethan slapped it. “I bet she isn’t disfigured either—she’s cursed so she looks unseemly, and that’s why she has to wear that veil.”

Gerald shut the door. The twins were still talking excitedly.

“If Alma’s cursed, what do you think she looked like before?”

“Must be a beauty. Every time I see her retreating figure, I have the instinct that she’s beautiful.” Enzo smirked. “My instincts are never wrong.”

Freja was calmly sipping tea. “Continue with your story, please.”

Gerald did. He told how Moira placed the curse on Sybil, making her look like a beast, and how she was frozen in time.

“Hang on!” Ethan struck his hands together. “Did you say Lady Sybil’s cursed, and she cannot age?”

“You know, this sounds eerily familiar to someone we know,” Enzo said.

The twins looked at each other. Then, in unison, they chorused, “Lady Alma is Sybil.”

Ethan grabbed Gerald’s hand. “Is that right, Ger? You knew all along that she was Sybil de la Roche?”

“The same Sybil whose portrait graces the gallery at home?”

Gerald smiled grimly. “Yes.”

The twins cheered, as if Gerald had handed them both a thousand gold ducats.

“So it IS she!”

“I just knew there was something uncanny about her!”

Enzo looked delighted. “Say, when the curse is lifted, she’ll be restored to her former self, right?”

“Imagine that.” Ethan rubbed his hands together. The gleam in his eyes made Gerald frown. He didn’t like that predatory glint. “Ger, do you mind?”

“I want to court her,” Enzo immediately said.

“No, I should have that privilege,” Ethan said indignantly. “You danced three times with Iliana yesterday. So you should let me have a chance with Sybil.”

“She won’t have either of you cads,” Gerald said curtly. For some reason, the idea of Sybil being around the twins didn’t sit well with him. Though he was certain she would snub them mercilessly. That is, when the curse was lifted. The twins wouldn’t bother her in her current beastly form. “Lady, I apologize for the interruption. Have you heard of a curse like hers? Do you think you’ll be able to help her?”

“I will need to see the person who’s cursed to determine if it’s feasible,” Freja replied. “But I’m afraid that it will not be likely. A curse that is able to last for decades is powerful, and I cannot spare any more power at the moment. And if Moira cast the curse...that only makes it more crucial that we find Urdu.”

An uncomfortable silence followed. Urdu was the most powerful mage alive. They needed his help.

Freja paused. She closed her eyes for a moment, then spoke. “I may as well tell you this. Moira is Urdu’s daughter.”

Stunned silence followed.

“NO,” the twins said loudly.

“Moira is Urdu’s daughter?” Gerald repeated, feeling stupid. “Then how could he...is that why he doesn’t want to be found?”

“I strongly suspect that is the reason.” Freja’s shoulders drooped and she shook her head. “In fact, Urdu has two daughters. His other one—Moira’s sister—is called Sorcha. Sorcha isn’t half as powerful as Moira, but she looks up to her older sister and does whatever she asks.”

“There’s a sister?” Enzo said.

“Isn’t one witch enough?” Ethan said.

Freja sighed. “Moira was exceptionally clever, and through studying under her father and experimenting on her own, she gained power. She grew even more powerful when she discovered the dark arts—spells that required blood sacrifice, for example. Dark arts are forbidden, just like spells that tamper with the mind are banned.”

The Savon princes listened, fascinated, when a knock came on the door. Gerald exited the room and found the palace guard waiting outside.

“Lady Alma is currently not at the palace, Your Highness,” he reported.

“What about her servants?”

“Both of them are also gone. I don’t know when they will return.”

Disappointed, Gerald returned to the room. He had hoped Freja would be at least able to lift Sybil’s silencing charm.

Once Gerald was back inside, Freja resumed her story. “When Moira began experimenting with dark arts, Urdu was furious. He tried to punish her. His human wife took her daughter’s side and tried to make Urdu lessen the punishment. But Moira was incorrigible. Her greatest desire, apart from becoming more powerful, was to alter her appearance. Urdu was a brilliant mage, but he wasn’t blessed with good looks. In fact, his appearance was abnormally ugly for human standards—I’ve heard someone said he resembled more a horse than a man. His wife wasn’t bad-looking, but both Moira and Sorcha took after their father.”

Gerald curled his fingers for a second and let go. Everything started with Moira’s unhappiness with her looks.

“Enough about Urdu,” Freja said, looking impatient. “Gerald, is that all you’ve found? Nothing in Tybalt that might give us a further clue?”

“There’s a ring,” Gerald admitted. “Urdu gave Annalisa a ring that would summon him if Moira continued to bother her. I used the ring as a catalyst for the tracking spell, but it failed.”

Freja looked surprised. “You created a tracking spell?”

“I was able to attempt one, like last time we went after Princess Iliana,” Gerald admitted reluctantly. “I followed the instructions and tried twice, but nothing happened. Is it because the ring was made forty years ago and could no longer work as a catalyst?”

“That is possible.” Freja paused for a moment. “Not that I do not trust your spell-making ability, but I’d like to have a look at the tracking spell you made.”

“Of course.” Gerald wasn’t offended. If Freja could make the spell work, he’d be nothing but grateful. “I still have the ingredients stored away in my suite.”

“Then let’s go to your room.” Freja stood up. “We mustn’t let any time go to waste.”

They went out and asked the palace guards to take them back to the main wing of the building. Soon they were back in Gerald’s room. He went to the cabinet where he kept the magical ingredients locked up, and opened the lid.

“Here’s the ring Urdu presented to Annalisa,” he said, handing the ring to Freja, who examined it closely.

There were barely any traces of runes on the ring, which meant that whatever magic was worked into the object was likely gone.

“It is indeed from a long time ago,” Freja said, turning the ring on her palm. “Suppose you bring out the compass and I’ll see what I can do.”

Gerald brought out the compass. “Do you need a new one? This is the one I used to make the spell; a new one could be more effective.”

Freja suddenly snatched the compass from him.

“Lady?”

Freja tapped the top of the compass. That was when Gerald noticed the tip of the compass, which was normally silver, was now a deep, dark umber. The compass spun, pointing northwest.

He couldn’t believe it. When he and Sybil worked on the tracking spell, the compass never budged nor changed color.

“By the magi!” Enzo exclaimed. “Didn’t you say the spell failed?”

“It’s working now,” Ethan said, scratching his head.

“I need a map,” Freja said. “A map that includes all the kingdoms, not just Arksar and Savony. Judging from the color of the compass and the direction it’s pointing, the new location is in another place.”

Gerald called a servant, who promptly fetched them the map required. Freja spread the map across the table. In the center of the map was Arksar. To the south of Arksar was Savony. But as the compass pointed northwest, they were looking at the west of Arksar, which was the sea. On the other

side of the sea was a cluster of islands, some large, some small. To the south of the islands lay the kingdom of Masaro, famous for its desserts.

“Here.” Freja’s finger circled the islands. “I don’t know which island it is, but Urdu has to be here.”

A journey across the sea. Gerald shut his eyes for a second. This had better be right.

CHAPTER 28

Sybil wandered aimlessly in the city, ignoring the snow falling gently in the streets. Her fur plus walking around were more than enough to keep her from shivering. She had no idea what she wanted to do—all she knew was that the first thing in the morning, she had to go out. The last thing she wanted was to run into Gerald.

Victoire was sleeping soundly when she went out. It was nearly midnight when her maid returned—Sybil had chastised her for being late.

“But the ball was wonderful,” Victoire said, rubbing her eyes. “I never saw such splendor. I couldn’t tear my eyes away.”

Her maid looked rather pale—Sybil’s irritation evaporated, replaced by concern.

“Did you steal any liquor?”

“No...I wouldn’t dare. May I go to bed?”

As the birthday celebration was over, the city seemed less attractive. Just a few days ago, when she visited the bookstores, there were decorations over doorways and in the windows. Now that Iliana was officially seventeen, the decorations were taken down.

A few bookstores were closed, and the few that were open didn’t appeal to her. It was still early, and people could have stayed up celebrating last night. Or maybe she had lost her appetite for book-shopping. Somehow, even with the soothing surroundings of leather-bound books and the smell of ink and paper, she couldn’t be comforted.

Last night’s memory came rushing back to her mind. Sybil put a hand to her head, where a dull ache resided. Gerald couldn’t have said yes. She

told herself countless times that no one would want to marry her, and yet she still went ahead and made a fool of herself.

And she couldn't blame him. She was a beast. She didn't even treat Gerald like a good friend, much less a romantic partner. If she were Gerald, she'd reject herself too.

Stop wasting your time on him, Sybil. He might like you, but he'll never make you his wife.

In the end, when she found herself going down the same street for the third time, Sybil entered a small shop that advertised desserts from Masaro. Few customers patronized the shop in the morning, and she had no problem getting the best seat—a table next to the window. Icicles hung from the houses across the street. Occasionally, an Arksan walked past the shop, wisps of blond hair peeking out from a woolen cap or scarf.

The waitress brought her a glass of zabaione, a light custard served hot with blueberries and a dash of sweet wine. Sybil dipped her spoon into the dessert, careful to keep the veil covered over her face, and savored the custard in tiny portions. No wonder Masaros developed into connoisseurs on desserts. They were known to be hot-headed and often got into fights over trivial matters, and so they had the bright idea of using sweets to smooth over the conflict and tension.

A movement from the corner of her eye made her sit up. Someone sitting in the back of the room was watching her. She'd had the uncanny suspicion that someone was trailing her, since that day she visited the bookstores, but had thought the stares were innocuous curiosity due to her veil. But curious passers-by wouldn't follow her into a dessert shop.

When she paid for the zabaione and went outside, she pretended to go round a corner—a shortcut to the bookstore. But once she turned, she abruptly reversed her steps and faced the person following her. With the speed she'd gained from turning into a beast, she grabbed the man's wrist and twisted it. He yelped in pain.

"Let me go!"

He was young, around Victoire's age, with typical Arksan features. Nothing striking about him, which perhaps made him an ideal person to shadow her.

"Who are you?" Sybil asked, still keeping a firm grip on his wrist.

He looked sullen. "Nothin' you need to know."

Sybil's sharp eye caught a small graphic embroidered on the man's tunic. "Are you from the palace?"

When he didn't answer, she stepped forward and tried to put as much threat in her tone as possible. "If you're not telling, I'll report to the king."

At that, he laughed. "The king employed me, wench."

"Ah, so it *was* the king," Sybil said. "Why did he send you to follow me?" When the man didn't speak, she added, "It's the princess, isn't it? He's extremely protective of his daughter."

A moment passed before the man opened his mouth.

"Yeah," the man mumbled. "He wasn't sure who you are, refusing to show your face. The prince claims you're a friend, but His Majesty's taking no chances."

"Well, tell him not to worry any more about his precious daughter," Sybil said, icy fury getting the better of her. She released her hold and the man staggered back, rubbing his wrist, which was bright red. "I'm leaving the palace today."

"Are you a monster or what?" he whimpered. "You're too strong to be a lady."

Sybil ignored him. She was back at the palace in twenty minutes. Or shorter, she wasn't sure. But she did know that she had to leave. Get out of the palace, get back home.

When the carriage came to a halt in the courtyard, Sybil sprang off with the movement of a cat. She hurried up the stairs, and at the second floor landing, she almost ran into Gerald.

"Sybil!" He caught her arm. "You're back! I've been trying to find you all morning."

Her veil swayed. Her first thought was to wrench her arm from Gerald's grasp, but the light in his eyes made her pause.

"Has the mage shown up?"

"You've read my mind." He grinned. "Yes, Freja has finally appeared, but she's gone already."

"Gone?" She stared. "Did she just appear and go? How long was she here? Why didn't you ask her to stay?"

"Long story short, she came to ask the details of the tracking spells, but had to leave early because she received a message. She has a decade-old feud with a witch and was alerted of the witch's location."

Another witch? Moira was enough trouble.

“When she came, I wanted her to remove your silencing charm, but you weren’t at the palace.” Gerald raked a hand through his hair. “But don’t worry, we have unexpected good news. Remember the ring from Annalisa? Before Freja left, she figured out the location where Urdu might be.”

“The new tracking spell?” Sybil could remember the compass. It hadn’t even moved an inch. “Did the mage fix it? Was there something wrong we did?”

Gerald shrugged. “I don’t know. She didn’t do anything; all she asked was to see the compass. Somehow, the color’s changed and it spun to point northwest. Maybe the magic needed time to take effect. But the thing is it’s working, so we’re making preparations.”

Sybil stared. “Preparations for what?”

Gerald led her upstairs to his room. On the table was a large map. He pointed at a circle marked out in red ink on the northwest corner. “Here. We’re going to the Finsoor islands.”

Sybil wasn’t especially bright at geography, but she knew that Finsoor was far away—even if they set sail from Arksar, it would take them days before they could reach the islands.

“Urdu’s living over...*there*?”

Gerald launched into an explanation about Moira, who was actually Urdu’s daughter.

“Urdu chose to hide away from the public because he doesn’t want to face his past. Because he’s tired of patching up the evil wrongs that Moira committed.”

Sybil’s jaw dropped. Luckily he couldn’t see her behind the veil.

“How do you know it will work this time? It could be another wild goose chase.”

“It could be,” he said. “But I don’t want to give up any chance. We need him to help with the countercurse, and who knows, he could even break your curse.”

Sybil didn’t like the thought of traveling on the ship, however interesting it was to read about sea travels. What would it be like to travel on water? She couldn’t swim. What would happen if she got seasick? What if a storm came up and wrecked the ship? Could she stay behind and wait until they came back?

“I know you probably don’t fancy the exhausting journey, but if you come, we should have a better chance asking Urdu to return with us. Moira is his daughter, and you’re her victim. He has more or less responsibility to lift your curse. Besides, this could be a chance to get away from the person who was following you.”

“Oh, that.” Sybil explained that it was a man sent by King Tyrell. Gerald looked indignant, but agreed that it could have been worse.

“At least it wasn’t anyone with sinister intentions of harming you.” He took a step closer to her. “Come with us, Sybil. Tyrell is providing us with his best ship and a handpicked crew. Finsoor is said to have the most amazing sights that you can’t see in Arksar or Savony.”

“All right,” she finally said. “I’ll go.” A tiny part of her secretly rejoiced at the chance to spend more time with him.

“Excellent,” Gerald said, smiling at her. “In that case, you had better start packing. We’re leaving in two days.”

CHAPTER 29

The sea breeze ruffled his hair as Gerald stood on the top of the ship. Of the twenty-five years he had lived, only a few days were spent abroad—during that trip to Arksar to ambush Iliana and draw out Freja from her hiding place. As he breathed in the salty sea air and listened to the foamy waves crashing below, he marveled at how he'd gone from somebody who has seldom left the castle, to someone who was now sailing across the ocean.

Gerald glanced over the ship. It wasn't an enormous carrier, but it was sufficient for their needs. He had a ready supply of herbs and small spells to help them during the journey. There was a spell that cured seasickness that came useful—the twins threw up a few times before they applied it.

Though he was excited about the trip, part of him felt uneasy, though he couldn't explain why. They were just going to find Urdu and beg his help to bring down the trolls and remove Sybil's curse. There shouldn't be anything dangerous about this journey. Freja even asked two mages to accompany them. One of the mages had met Urdu twenty years ago and might be able to convince Urdu to join them in weaving the countercurse.

"Morning, Prince Gerald," a voice said behind him. It was a middle-aged man with sharp, eagle-like eyes. A jaunty black hat perched on his head. Captain Garth, in King Tyrell's service, had thirty years of experience on the sea.

Gerald nodded and smiled. "Captain."

"Ever traveled on a ship?" Garth removed his hat and ran his fingers through his messy brown hair.

"Never. It's fascinating, though."

“You’re doing well for a man who has never been at sea.”

“Thanks to seasick spells.” Gerald patted his pocket. The spells worked on everyone except Victoire, who kept to her cabin and rarely came out. “How long do we have until we arrive at the islands?”

“I’d say we still have a few days’ journey.” Garth exhaled. “Wouldn’t mind seeing the Finsoor islands again. The landscape is nothing like you have ever seen.”

“What’s it like?”

A woman appeared. Lorenza, one of the mages who agreed to help create the countercurse. She was young for a mage—Gerald guessed she was in her late twenties—and reasonably attractive with curly black hair and olive skin. She had traveled all the way from Masaro, which was a continent across the sea, and therefore had no problems with seasickness. Or maybe it was because she was a mage.

“Volcanoes. Hot springs. Geysers,” Garth said. “The lands are an amazing sight, but you’ve got to be wary of the natives. They are on average taller than Arksans, and stronger as well. Something to do with the weather, they say. Finsoor weather is pretty harsh climate.”

“Is there anything that we should watch out for?” Gerald said. “We’ll be safe from them as long as we keep it civil and polite?”

“Depends on their mood,” Garth said. “With a pretty face like yours, they might club you on the head and drag you off to their cave.”

Gerald grimaced. Not another “compliment” on his beauty.

“I was just teasing you!” Garth gave a hearty laugh. “They won’t bother us, as long as we don’t lie or steal. They’ve got better things to do with their time than worrying about strangers.”

Lorenza chewed on her lip. “Wonder what made Urdu leave Arksar and set up residence in this faraway area.”

Footsteps, eager and fast, came toward them.

“Hey!” Enzo said, heading straight to the mage. “Sweet Lorenza, you look absolutely enticing today. The journey at sea would be boring without your charming presence.”

Gerald rolled his eyes. Lorenza had to be several years older than the twins, but as one of the few women on board, they flocked to her like a moth drawn to flame.

“Lorenza, tell us about your life in Masaro. It must be fascinating. When this is over, do come to Savony. We’ll receive you as our honored

guest.”

Unwilling to stay and endure the twins’ inept flirting, Gerald left the deck. He hadn’t seen Sybil this morning at breakfast and wondered if all was well with her. Hopefully Victoire was recovering from her seasickness.

He strode in the direction of the cabins, ignoring the admiring gazes from a few crew members (some things never change, even on a sea voyage), looking around for a tall, slender woman wearing a veil.

A moment later, he found Sybil seated next to a man around forty, who had smooth black hair and fine features. His eyes were dull and lifeless, though from the way he moved with ease without the need of a cane, it was difficult to believe he was blind.

“It took us weeks to cross the desert,” the man was saying. “But it was worth the journey. I’ve only been to Arksar once, and this is an opportunity to experience something different.”

Before they boarded the ship, Captain Garth had introduced the black-haired man as Julong, the other mage, who came from the Lulan empire from the other side of the desert. Compared to other kingdoms, Lulaners were less common, as the harsh conditions of the desert were even worse than the sea. But Lulan products, such as the lacquer ware and porcelain vases, were in much demand, and Queen Marguerite had a red lacquer box where she kept her wedding jewelry.

“How did you come to Arksar in the first place?” Sybil asked. Her voice lacked its usual curtness. Instead, it held interest.

“Freja sent me a letter through a caravan. She had trouble dealing with a witch, and learned that our flying daggers are useful in battle. So she placed an order for a set of flying daggers from my master. I was young and wanted a chance to see the land beyond the desert, so I came. I taught her how to use the daggers. I then spent a few months in Arksar and Savony. When I was traveling through Arksar, I ran into Moira committing forbidden magic and tried to stop her. She was defeated and disappeared, but I also lost my eyesight in the battle.”

Julong placed his hands on his knees. “Freja contacted me and told me that Moira was planning to return. When she asked if I could lend a hand, I did not hesitate. In our culture, honor is above everything. I couldn’t pass up the chance for revenge. Besides, I have no other dependents. I need not worry someone is at home, waiting for my safe return.

“But enough about me.” Julong leaned back on his chair and folded his hands together. “How did you end up on this ship, Lady Alma?”

Sybil explained, much to Gerald’s surprise. Considering how Sybil was reluctant to open up to strangers, he didn’t expect that she’d tell her story. But knowing her pride, Sybil might prefer to unburden her mind to a complete stranger than reveal her story to a friend.

A mild irritation came over him. He had expected to find Sybil alone, probably reading in her cabin. He didn’t expect she’d already be making friends with a man.

Julong raised a hand. There were calluses on his palm and fingers, suggesting traces of battle. Gerald didn’t know much about Lulan mages, but Freja had mentioned that Julong was an expert fighter. His skills could be handy if the Finsoor natives turned aggressive.

“Someone is nearby,” he said, turning his head so he was facing in Gerald’s direction.

Sybil looked up. “How did you know he appeared?” From the tone of her voice, it seemed she didn’t realize he was near until Julong spoke.

“I heard his breathing.” Julong gave an enigmatic smile. “Judging from the sound and pace, it belongs to someone young.”

“Correct,” Sybil said. Though he couldn’t see her expression through the veil, Gerald detected admiration in her tone. For some reason it bothered him, like a book with a score of dog-eared pages. “This is Prince Gerald of Savony. He is the second eldest of twelve.”

“Prince of Savony?” Julong rose and made a short bow.

“Please, there’s no need for formality,” Gerald said quickly, uncomfortable that a man who was nearly old enough to be his father was bowing to him. “We very much appreciate your willingness to assist us in this quest, Master Julong.”

“It is no trouble at all. Like I said, I’m glad for the chance to avenge my eyes.” Julong started in the direction of the cabins. “It is time for me to take another seasick spell. This is my first time traveling on the sea.”

Sybil rose as well. “Would you like me to assist you?”

“I will be fine.” He smiled gently. He was good-looking in an exotic way, Gerald realized. “I have been blind for twenty years, and I have learned that the first thing to do in an unfamiliar environment is to memorize the layout.” He went off in the direction of his cabin. Sybil looked after him, and Gerald wondered what she was thinking.

“He’s too old for you,” he blurted.

“Excuse me?” She looked at him as if he were insane. “Are you talking to me about Julong?”

“Yes.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” she said. Gerald thought that she had caught his message, but then she said, “I am the one who’s too old. When I was cursed, he wasn’t even born.”

“You know what I mean,” he said, feeling irritated. “You weren’t even twenty when you were cursed. You’re young enough to be his daughter.”

She stared at him. “What’s wrong with you?”

He ignored the question. “Since we have two mages on the ship, we ought ask them to remove the silencing charm placed on you. Julong looks like his expertise lies in battle magic, but Lorenza should have no problem with the charm.”

She recoiled, as if he suggested that Lorenza was going to cut her up into tiny pieces. “I appreciate the concern, but I don’t need it.”

“Why not?” he asked, confused. “Even if she can’t remove your curse, she can let you talk about it.”

“Really, it doesn’t matter. We’re going to find Urdu and he’ll remove the curse.”

Gerald sensed something was wrong. “Sybil, is there something you don’t want me to know about the curse?”

She looked away, and he knew he hit on the truth. “Please,” he begged. “Or if you don’t want me to know, you can just tell Lorenza. I’m sure she’s capable of discretion.”

Sybil shook her head. Silently she turned and walked away.

“Promise me you’ll think about it!” he called after her.

CHAPTER 30

Sybil headed back to her cabin. No way did she want Gerald to know the truth—the way to break her curse was a proposal of marriage. He might interpret that she proposed to him because she only wanted to break the curse, not because she loved him.

A low groan came from Victoire's bunk bed. Sybil felt sorry for her—Victoire had been so eager to see Finsoor.

"It's my only chance to see the world, milady," she had said, pleadingly. "I've never been on a ship before. I don't want to travel back to the manor alone, and I don't care for staying at Laurent's place. Let me come with you."

Sybil eventually gave up, reasoning that if Victoire got sick, there were always seasick charms on hand.

But the charms didn't work. Victoire stayed in her cabin for most of the journey, sometimes retching into a bucket. Swallowing her distaste for the unpleasantness, Sybil tried to help, but Victoire always warded her off.

Today she wasn't much better. Her face was pale, her breathing was uneven, and her fingers plucked at the enamel locket from her childhood lover.

"I'll put it away from you," Sybil said, reaching for the locket. Last time when the clasp broke and the locket got snagged in Gerald's tunic, Victoire was frantic with worry.

"No!" Her voice was vehement, determined, almost the volume of a shout. "Don't you dare take this away from me!"

Sybil drew her hand away, alarmed. This wasn't like Victoire.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

“Just leave me alone.” This time her voice was noticeably smaller. “Please.”

Sybil pursed her lips. Captain Garth said it would take several days till they reach Finsoor. If Victoire remained this weak, she might come down with a serious illness.

She decided to ask for another seasick charm from the captain. Perhaps the one she gave to Victoire simply didn’t work. Maybe it was past its expiration date, just like milk that went bad from sitting outside too long.

Patting on the strings that held the veil in place, Sybil emerged from the cabin and climbed to the deck. Not afar, Gerald’s twin brothers were arguing about who would escort Lorenza to dinner. Sybil rolled her eyes—they were on a ship, not attending a ceremonial event. Hard to believe that Gerald’s character was nothing like his brothers, even though they grew up together.

Near the mast, a booming voice made her pause.

“What do you mean, half our food supplies are gone?”

Captain Garth, his face red and his eyes flashing, was yelling at a sailor, who cowered and looked like he wanted to jump off the ship.

“I…I don’ know, Captain,” he said, his lip quivering. “Me and Ulrik, we went down to the cellar, and when we opened the door, half the sacks were missing.”

“Anything else missing?”

The sailor hung his head. “The barrels. Only one barrel left.”

Garth looked like he was going to explode. “ONE BARREL? How’re we going to survive without fresh water?”

Sybil stepped forward.

“Lady Alma.” The captain ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry you heard that—I can’t believe this happened. Out of thirty years I’ve been on sea, this is the first time we’ve had so much food and water missing.”

“Have you conducted a thorough search of the vessel?”

“I’ll do it right now. But how hard could it be to hide all those sacks of food? This ain’t a large ship, Lady Alma. No, it’s easier to throw the food and water off board than hide ‘em.”

“Why would anyone do that?”

“No idea,” he said grimly. “We’ll look for the food now. But if nothing turns up, we’ll perish on the sea. Even the mages on board can’t magick up food and water for us.”

“Is there land nearby?”

“There’s a medium-sized island to the south, though it’s not the way the compass is pointing. We might as well make a stop there, replenish our food supply, and get back on the journey. It’ll do us good to get our feet on solid, dry land. Only thing is, we’ll need something to trade with locals.”

“I don’t have much of value on me,” Sybil said. “But I’ll be happy to donate whatever necessary.”

“I doubt it’ll be a problem,” Captain Garth said, a twinkle in his eye. “We can have that Lulan mage threaten them with his flying weapons, or we can have Prince Gerald ask them nicely. He’s the best-looking boy I ever beheld, and I warrant that even the natives out here won’t say no to a pretty face like his. Ulrik!” he bellowed. “Get to the steering wheel and tell Lothar to change our direction to south!”

Having barked his orders, Garth turned to Sybil. “Excuse me, Lady. I got to make preparations for the docking.”

Sybil placed a hand on her breast and inclined her head. Beast as she was, she wasn’t going to discard her ladylike manners. “But of course. I shan’t keep you, Captain.”

On her way back to the cabin, she passed Julong. His hands gripped the railings, his nose in the air, and his brows were drawn together, as if he was contemplating a complicated problem. He immediately turned, however, sensing her presence.

“Lady Alma.”

“How did you know it’s me?” She hadn’t uttered a word.

He pointed at his right ear. “When you’re blind, your sense of hearing becomes uncommonly sharp. I can tell from the pace of your strides, the rustle of your gown. No other person on the ship can have the same sounds that you make.”

Impressive. “We’re making a stop at a nearby island.” She told him about the mystery of the missing food. “Since your hearing is uncommonly sharp, have you heard anything suspicious?”

He steepled his fingers together and contemplated. “Yesterday, during dinner. I thought I heard a splash, followed by another, coming from the rear of the ship. It might have been someone hurling the food and water into the sea.”

A cold trickle ran down Sybil’s spine. Who’d want to destroy the food? Wouldn’t that spell disaster for the person as well?

“Were you able to tell who threw the food off the ship?”

“Too many people were walking around at that time, and the ship’s rear was too far for me to distinguish the person.” Julong laid a hand on her elbow. “Take care, Lady Alma. The wind cannot have been the culprit. Someone on this ship is attempting to prevent us from reaching our destination.”

* * *

THE ANXIETY WEIGHING on Sybil’s mind was temporarily lifted when the ship arrived at the southern island. Gulls soared through the air, cawing. The island was surprisingly verdant, covered with moss and grass. The air was a mix of salt from the sea and freshness from the grass. A deep blue lagoon lay surrounded by spruce trees—the twins remarked they should come and take a dip when the weather was warm enough. In the distance, a white-tipped volcano rose against the pale blue sky.

The twins made a rather embarrassing spectacle as they stationed themselves on the end of the plank, holding their hands out toward Lorenza, and begging for the honor of escorting her from the ship to land, but she ignored them and stepped on the ground as light as a gazelle.

Sybil put an arm over Victoire’s shoulders and guided her across the plank. “How’re you feeling? Did the new charm work?”

“Guess so,” she whispered.

“Just let me know if you need anything.”

Victoire nodded. Her face was still pale.

A gust of wind rustled through the trees, lifting the hair on their necks. It wasn’t as cold as Sybil expected. On the map, Finsoor was even farther north than Arksar, yet it looked more like early spring on the southern island.

“Why is it warmer up here?” Sybil asked the captain.

“There’s a warm current that travels this way every year,” he answered. “And there are volcanoes, ensuring the locals get plenty of hot water.”

“Fascinating,” Julong said. He tapped on the ground with a wooden cane. “Will you mind describing the scenery to me, Miss Alma?”

Sybil complied. When she paused for breath, she noticed Gerald glancing in their direction with a frown on his face. She raised an eyebrow

but resumed her conversation with Julong. Surely the prince couldn't be jealous.

"All right," Garth was saying. "Everyone off board? Let's go."

They set off across the grassland, Sybil supporting Victoire with an arm. Gerald offered to help, but Sybil waved him off. Were she in her lady form she might have let him take over, but as a beast she had no problem supporting her maid.

After they trudged along the uneven terrain for a while, they heard the sound of water splashing over rocks, calling their attention to a magnificent waterfall cascading down a cliff and creating a white mist over the rocks below. Sheep grazed over the land, indicating that human settlement was not far away.

"It's beautiful," Gerald said, gazing around him with appreciation. "Even more beautiful than how Prewitt described."

"Who's Prewitt?" Julong asked.

"He's one of my favorite authors," Gerald said, with a look at Sybil. "And Alma's as well."

"Ah, no wonder." Julong tapped on the ground with his cane. "I have not read extensively."

"It is never too late to start," Gerald said. "Books are a pleasure that ought not be missed."

Sybil jabbed his side. "What're you doing?" she hissed. "You're never rude."

He blinked. "Sorry, what did I say?"

She glared at him. He couldn't see through her veil, but they knew each other well enough by now that he surely could sense her glaring. "He's a mage; you'd do well to treat him with respect."

"I am treating him with respect."

Sybil made a noise of dissent, then glanced at Julong. The mage wore a serene smile, a hint of amusement curving his lips. She had no doubt that he heard everything, even though they kept their voices low.

"Milady?" Victoire said.

"Nothing," Sybil said. Raising her voice, she said, "There's a gorgeous waterfall near us, Master Julong. Have you ever seen one?"

About half an hour later, they came to a flat plain surrounded by hills. The river that ran from the waterfall cut across the plain. The water was sparkling clear, reflecting the hills. A hairy dog raced across the plain,

barking at them. Several cottages dotted along the river, with moss-covered roofs and stone walls.

Captain Garth went to one of the cottages and knocked on the door. A local answered. He was a large man, with long blond hair tied in a ponytail, and a thick accent that few except Garth could understand right away. But while communicating through verbal language was difficult, there was little doubt that the man was glad to receive them. He gave Garth a hearty hug, grinned at the rest of them, and hollered at his neighbors. Pretty soon the entire village turned out and the air was filled with chatter.

Perhaps because few visitors came to the island, the locals were enthusiastic about their arrival. Captain Garth's worries had been for naught. The women fawned over Gerald, who politely retreated to a spot near Sybil, but the twins happily took over and were soon flirting with flamboyant hand gestures and imitations of their heavy accents.

"Friend of Arksar," the village elder said to Garth. "You are most welcome to sit down with us and join us for our dinner."

Garth presented a pouch to the elder. It was filled with trinkets and several corked bottles—small Arksan spells that could provide heating and cure colds. "Our food supply is used up. We wish to purchase more from you."

The elder smiled. "That is no problem. Food we have plenty. But first, please join us for dinner."

The Arksans and Savons were glad to comply. To be honest, the local food wasn't any good. The sausages were too salty, the cabbage had a bitter flavor, and the bread was so tough that Sybil had a sudden desire to borrow the Peerless Knife from Gerald. But after a few days of salted pork and biscuits on the ship, the island food seemed delicious by comparison. Besides, the "sweets" that accompanied the meal—wild crab apples and hazelnuts—were tasty by any standard.

"You seem pensive," Gerald said, approaching Sybil's "hiding" spot. She had deliberately chosen a secluded place behind a bush, away from the crowd, so she could eat without people discovering her face under the veil. It was rather irksome trying to eat with a veil, but she'd rather not make the locals gawk and point fingers. What if the locals decided she was a bizarre creature and should be eliminated? Some curious stares came her way, but didn't stay long. Their crew was interesting enough to command

the attention of the locals. Julong had a few local women surrounding him—his blindness was no obstruction to his appeal.

"Just thinking." Sybil bit into an apple and chewed. While the danger of starving had passed, the fact remained that someone had deliberately tossed the food off the ship. That someone had to be male, maybe even more than one, to be able to dispose of so many barrels and crates.

"Would you mind sharing your thoughts?" He moved closer. "Is it about Urdu?"

"Not now," Sybil said. The person who destroyed the food might be close by. "I'll tell you later."

Disappointment crossed his face, but he nodded. "Anything I can do, you only have to let me know."

Normally she'd brush it off, but after her disastrous proposal, Sybil knew she had to stop being blunt and rude to him. "Thank you," she said softly.

He gave her a smile that would have melted all the ice in Arksar. "You're welcome, Sybil."

"Alma," she hissed, but it didn't matter much at the moment. Everyone was talking and laughing; no one noticed his slip of tongue.

After dinner, Captain Garth and the village elder went off to negotiate on the amount of food and water to carry back to the ship. By the time they returned, the crew was weary and content to sit around the campfire.

"Let's stay here for a night," Enzo said. Two local girls, their blond hair in braids, were clinging to his arms and looking on him with starstruck eyes. "Some of us still need to recover from seasickness."

"Yes, let's," Ethan begged. He looked like he was elated for the attention he never got during his life back in Savony. "Captain, be a good sport. It's way past dinnertime; we can set sail tomorrow."

The captain glanced at Victoire, who was lying on the grass near the fire, a hand over her eyes.

"Very well," he said. "Just one night."

Although it was well past dinnertime, it was light enough to see clearly. Prewitt's travels had described it could be daytime all the time in some places far north.

The campfire burned brightly. The village elder began to tell the history of the island, from how his ancestors found the islands, to how

invaders from Masaro came and tried to conquer the island. The Arksan crew sat around with the locals, their attention riveted to the stories.

Sybil, on the other hand, felt a little weary. Not as much in body, but as in her mind. Would they finally locate Urdu this time? After the three failed compasses that Freja had created, Sybil held little hope that this time would be a success. And if the compass led them to a dead end again, then what? And then there was the problem of the mysterious person who destroyed their food on board. She scanned the crowd, wondering who might be a possible culprit, but she couldn't read minds. Lorenza and Julong seemed the most capable of tossing the food off board, given their inherent magical abilities, but why? What could be their motive?

"Lady." Victoire tapped her shoulder.

"Are you feeling better now?" Sybil asked.

"Vastly. I'm feeling so much better since my feet hit dry land. Listen, there's something I have to tell you." She looked around, a conspiratorial gleam on her eyes. "Prince Gerald wants to meet you by the waterfall."

"Right now?"

"He said he wanted to tell you something, and only you."

Her heart began to flutter. Surely Gerald wasn't going to say he was sorry for refusing her, and he had now changed his mind. More likely he was going to discuss with her about Urdu, or the mystery of the missing food. But nevertheless, Sybil found that she wanted to talk to him as well.

"All right."

The waterfall was a little way off the main settlement, but with her quick strides, Sybil reached the destination sooner than she expected. Gerald was standing with his back to her, admiring the water cascading down into the pool below. Because of the noise from the waterfall, she had to shout twice before he turned around.

"Sybil," he said, with a bright smile. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

She stared. "Wasn't it you who wanted to talk to me?"

"Victoire told me that you wanted to meet me here."

Sybil whirled around, alarmed. That was when she heard fingers snap, and thick, sturdy ropes appeared in thin air. They flew at her like snakes, and before she could back away, the ropes landed around her body and tightened. She struggled, but even her beastly strength was no match for the ropes laced with magic. She glanced at Gerald, who was also fighting

against the ropes, but in a matter of seconds he was overpowered. Both of them were bound and unable to move, like spider's prey.

A high-pitched giggle sounded from a young woman dressed in gray.

"Victoire?"

Victoire smirked. The enamel locket dangling over her front was glowing crimson-gold. She pressed a finger on the locket and made a flicking motion. Crimson sparks settled over Sybil, and she suddenly felt inexplicably drowsy. It had to be a powerful sleeping spell, her groggy mind registered, before she passed out.

CHAPTER 31

Gerald opened his eyes. His arms were bound tightly to his side, and no matter how hard he struggled, he was unable to free himself. He was lying in a dark room with a damp, musty odor, and a gentle rocking motion indicated he was back on the sea. At his side lay another figure.

"Sybil?" he said tentatively.

No answer.

"Sybil, can you hear me?"

Still no answer. Gerald rolled over and tried to prod her on the shoulder. She stirred, slowly, and in a groggy voice said, "What...where?"

Gerald let out a sigh of relief. "I think we're back on the ship."

She let out a noise of surprise. "But how...Victoire!"

Gerald closed his eyes for a second. Back at the campfire, Victoire had approached him and told him in low voice tinged with excitement, "My mistress wants to speak to you in private."

"About what?"

She put a finger to her lips. "Let her tell you in person."

Seldom had Sybil requested his company. So he went, half filled with anticipation, the other half filled with curiosity, only to find that she didn't have a private chat in mind. He was disappointed, but more than disappointment was the shock. The shock that Victoire had set them up and used magic to abduct them from the island.

"This is the power of a mage," he said hoarsely, wishing for a drink of water. "Something's wrong with Victoire. Did you know she had magic?"

“Never.” Anxiety laced Sybil’s tone. “She can’t even help me with spellmaking. This can’t be Victoire—she’d never betray me.”

It was like a bad nightmare, but the dull pain in his head told him this was real. Nothing made sense. Perhaps there was a reason to kidnap him—he was, after all, a prince of Savony, even if he wasn’t going to inherit the throne.

But to kidnap Sybil as well? No one knew she was Lady de la Roche. And even if they did...what was the objective in kidnapping a woman who was cursed to look like a beast?

“Do you have any spells?” she whispered. This time she sounded calm and collected—more like the woman he respected and admired. “Something that might help us get out of here?”

Gerald couldn’t move his hands, but he felt a hard object on his side. The Peerless Knife was still in his pocket. By some miracle, “Victoire” hadn’t searched them for weapons. But then, “Victoire” probably thought that they couldn’t escape with the enchanted ropes.

But the Peerless Knife was anything but ordinary. It had sawed through a tree that was ancient and enchanted for hundreds of years. If it could cut through ancient magic, it would have no problem against a normal mage’s power.

But with his hands tightly bound, he couldn’t reach into his pocket. He struggled, trying to slip his fingers into his tunic, but “Victoire” had done a thorough job.

“I have a knife in my pocket, but I can’t reach it,” he whispered, just in case “Victoire” overheard them talking. “Can you roll over and get it out?”

“I’ll try.”

“Be careful; it’s sharp enough to cut through anything.”

“I’m wearing gloves.”

He permitted himself a smile in the dark. It must be a nuisance to wear gloves all the time, but this time it was an advantage. “Be careful.”

She wriggled toward him. Sybil’s fingers prodded against his side, and he shifted so she could reach into his pocket.

“I can’t pull it out; my fingers can’t wiggle out of the ropes,” she hissed. “Raise your hips; the knife should slide onto the floor.”

Just at that moment, the door of the cabin flung open. Light shone through, illuminating a dark figure standing outside. From the paleness of the sky behind the figure, Gerald judged it was dawn.

“Good morning.”

“Victoire” looked down at them, her hands on hips. “Had a restful sleep, my dears?”

Sybil raised her head. “What have you done to my maid?” she spat.

The mage laughed. “Concerned about your little servant? Let me put your mind to rest. You’re never getting her back. I have taken her body; she’s gone forever.”

Sybil gasped; a sob escaped her. Anguish tore through Gerald as well. He hadn’t known Victoire for a long time, but she was always friendly and cheerful, trying to help him in every way she could. She was a young girl when she was cursed. Now she would never have the chance to taste her freedom.

“No,” Sybil said, her expression wild and desperate. “Give her back to me, you witch! How could you...she’s done nothing to you! She isn’t—she can’t be...” Her voice gave out in a wordless sound of agony. Gerald’s fingers twitched—he wanted to reach out and hold her, to comfort her, but the cords binding him were too strong.

“Victoire” crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. “Haven’t you learned how to create spells? Once the body transformation takes place, it cannot be reverted.”

Sybil blinked; her face was shiny with tears. “Are you Moira? You failed to take my body forty years ago, so you’re taking revenge on me?”

Something felt wrong. From their past encounter with Annalisa, Gerald thought that Moira only chose women who were exceedingly beautiful. Victoire wasn’t even pretty with her bunny teeth. And even if her teeth were perfect, she didn’t have Sybil’s renowned beauty.

“Victoire” looked startled. “I’m not Moira, I’m her sister, Sorcha.”

“Why did you kill her?” Gerald said.

A wicked smile spread across Sorcha’s face. “Let me start by telling you: don’t even think about escaping. Your little friends are left on the island, most of them still fast asleep. By the time they discover both of you and the ship are missing, it will be too late.”

“They can follow us,” Sybil said.

Sorcha laughed so hard that her shoulders shook. “You seriously believe that? Who planted the tracking spell in your room? What made that tracking spell work? It is I!” She pointed a finger at her chest. “I got the brilliant idea of reviving this spell, and making you all get on the ship

and come sailing into my trap. It wouldn't have been easy to get only the two of you out of Arksar; there were so many annoying guards at the palace. But this way is easier. All I had to do was to get rid of the food and water on board, so that stupid captain would stop for help, and then steal the ship."

"You threw away our food and water?" Gerald said, fury rising. "How did you do it with so many people on the ship?"

Sorcha smirked. "There's a useful little thing called magic, my dear young prince."

The enamel locket glowed on the front of her dress. Gerald remembered how she pressed her finger on the locket, drawing on the power within, and used the magic to abduct him and Sybil. She must have drawn magic as well to destroy their food. He knew there were cloaking spells and lifting spells—Sorcha must have turned the barrels and crates invisible, then levitated them into the air, and tossed them into the sea.

"They will never find you, because I created the tracking spell with a different destination. They'll be heading south, but in fact we're going north." Sorcha smiled, showing Victoire's front teeth. While Victoire looked like a squirrel with those teeth, Sorcha's cold, calculating smile made her seem more like a demon.

The boat rocked. Sorcha looked back, and her smile grew wider. "We've arrived."

She snapped her fingers, and an invisible force jerked Gerald to his feet. He kept his gaze on Sorcha, though, noting a crimson ray of light channeling from the locket to her fingers. He wondered if she would be rendered powerless if he ripped the locket from her neck and tossed it away…

Sybil stumbled. He wanted to give her a hand, but his hands couldn't move. Together, pulled by Sorcha's magic, they marched out of the cabin and onto the deck.

Gerald would have appreciated the view if not for the dire situation they were in. Another island lay ahead. It wasn't as verdant as the first one, but the snow covering the grounds made it beautiful all the same. Icicles hung from the branches, and a white bear ambled on the ground, frolicking in a carefree manner.

"Surprised, aren't you?" Sorcha said with a wink. "Just a night's journey, but it's far colder here." As if to emphasize her point, a chilly

wind surged up, making Gerald shiver.

“Get off the boat,” Sorcha said. Pointing at a wooden plank, it rose into the air and settled between the ship and shore. “Don’t make me waste more energy, or I’ll break your arm.”

Sybil and Gerald looked at each other. There was no choice but to walk the plank and step on the new island.

“Welcome to the northern islands,” Sorcha said. “Come along, we don’t want to keep her waiting.”

The wind was chilly as it blew through his hair and cut across his face, as if it could hurt his skin. Never had he felt so cold since the fateful day he fell unconscious outside Sybil’s manor. Gerald walked faster, hoping the warmth generated from the exercise would alleviate the coldness. Glancing at Sybil, who seemed serene and calm, he remembered she had the protection of fur and thick skin.

How far were they from the south? They couldn’t have been too far, as the ship only traveled overnight, but the climate on this new island was eons different. It was possible; he read in a travel book of a small island that had a cold, rainy northern region and a sunny, dry southern region. But what troubled him was what Sorcha claimed of tampering with the tracking spell. The compass was pointing in a different direction. The crew would be on a wild goose chase.

The grounds were barren, similar to the underground lair of the trolls, but there were patches of ice here and there. No houses were visible. Were there any inhabitants on the island? The thought of being trapped on a deserted island, with only Sorcha and possibly Moira, was horrifying.

After a while, the mountain in the distance grew larger, looming over them like a giant. On the foot of the mountain was a cave. Something seemed to be glowing inside. But before they could enter, a tall figure emerged.

“Why’ve you been gone so long?” a voice screeched. It sounded like nails raking on glass.

Gerald halted. It was a woman, but she didn’t look fully human. Her face was long and thin, like a horse, her eyes yellow, and her nostrils prominent.

Urdu’s daughter. Moira, the witch, who cursed Sybil and tried to take Annalisa’s body, and who had a feud with the Arksan king and cursed the young prince to death.

“The Arksan princess was too well protected. I could’ve got her to you, but I didn’t want to waste too much power, sis.” Sorcha touched the locket hanging on her neck. “So I brought you a replacement.”

Moira’s yellow eyes focused on Sybil. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Sister, look again.” Sorcha snapped her fingers, and Sybil moved toward Moira in unnatural, jerky steps. “Do you not recognize her?”

Moira ripped the veil off, revealing Sybil’s demon face. Scales crawled over her morbid gray face; her silver eyes were filled with fear.

“By the magi,” the witch whispered. “It can’t be...her?”

Sorcha nodded. “Forty years ago. Savony forest. Daughter of Sir de la Roche.”

Moira broke into a gleeful grin. It twisted her dragon-like features, making her look more grotesque. “How has it been, my dear lady, to suffer what *I* have been through? Not so pleasant to have men rejecting you because you’re ugly? Forty years, and you can’t find a man to remove the curse on you.”

Sybil glared, but she remained silent. Something struck Gerald about what Moira said—Sybil needed a man to remove her curse. But how? What did the man have to do?

Moira turned to her sister. “How did you find her?”

“She happened to be in Arksar.” Sorcha shrugged. “Seeing her made me realize she would be a better choice for you. No one will come after you if you occupy her body. All of her relatives must be dead at this point. All you need to do is perform a countercurse. And in her original self, she’s more beautiful than that Arksan princess. You should know, sis.”

Moira crossed her arms. “Not a bad idea. I remember her looks—I’ve never seen a woman more beautiful than she, but…” Her voice died away as her gaze shifted to Gerald. “Where did you find such a stunning young man?”

“Take a guess.”

“I haven’t been on the continent for years. Just spit it out.”

Sorcha twirled a finger around her hair. “Prince Gerald. Second eldest prince of Savony. Perfect as your new consort.”

Gerald and Sybil spoke at the same time. “No.”

Moira stepped closer to Gerald. Her gaze ran over him, inspecting him as if he were a cut of meat on the butcher’s cutting board, and he met her gaze with a defiant look. He wasn’t going to show fear, even though he

couldn’t deny the anxiety and worry that gnawed at his heart. He was more concerned for Sybil’s safety. If the witch planned to possess her body, as Sorcha took Victoire’s, her life was at stake.

“Exquisite,” Moira breathed. “Absolutely exquisite.” She reached out and touched his jaw. “I have never seen a man who could be this beautiful.”

“Don’t touch him,” Sybil said bitingly.

Moira ignored her. “Even Tyrell cannot compare. How foolish I was to waste my magic cursing his son.”

She continued to caress Gerald’s cheek. He flinched and turned his head, all the while pondering any chance of escape.

“You have done well, sis. Better than I expected.”

Sorcha looked eager. “In that case, can I get more magic? I need to fix this.” She pointed at her protruding teeth.

“Why did you choose a girl with ugly front teeth? You could’ve done better.”

“I had to, because she was the lady’s maid. If I didn’t have her form, I wouldn’t have been able to fool them.”

“You’ll have to get more from the old man. After I perform the transformation spell on her—” Moira waved a hand at Sybil “—I won’t have any magic to spare for you.”

Fear—excruciatingly icy fear—ripped through Gerald. Sybil was going to lose her life, in the same way Victoire was gone.

“Don’t touch her!”

Moira raised an eyebrow. “I have learned from former consorts that it is easier to ignore what they say. Don’t worry, my little prince. I will treat you well, better than any of my previous consorts. I will restore her to her original self and take on her face. Surely, when confronted with a great beauty, even you cannot resist.”

“I’d rather have her with her scales and horns,” Gerald said, “than face you with dazzling looks.”

Moira’s hair seemed to crackle; her face filled with fury. “How dare you insult me! Don’t you even know what I’m offering you? You’re insane, mad...to prefer a face like *that*?” Her finger shook as she pointed at Sybil, who was equally frozen in shock, staring at him with a look of incredulity.

Gerald thought about retorting, but Moira's fury made the words die on his lips. Provoking Moira at the moment could be disastrous. He might convince her that he didn't care about beauty, but would that be enough to convince her to let them go? Unlikely, especially when she looked capable of murder.

"Lock him up," Moira commanded, speaking to her sister. Then she curled her fingers; Sybil stumbled forward. "Come with me, Lady de la Roche. I must weave the countercurse to remove that demon face of yours. Soon I will be the most beautiful woman in all kingdoms."

CHAPTER 32

Sybil tried to stay rooted to the ground, but Moira's power was too strong. Once Moira removed her curse, she would die. Victoire was already dead, and while her body was intact, knowing Sorcha inhabited her maid's body made her want to throw up. Sweet, energetic, if sometimes flighty, her dear little maid was never going to come back.

And now she was going to have the same fate.

When she decided she wouldn't rely on a man to propose and break her curse, when she thought she had to find a mage to help her, she hadn't expected things to turn out this way. Yes, she'd regain her beauty, but then she'd lose her life. Not the ideal scenario she wanted. And what about Laurent? What about Margo, Bernardin, and her other servants? Would lifting her curse extend to lifting theirs as well? If they could be saved, then at least her death wouldn't be meaningless.

An image of Gerald flashed through her mind. The thought of Moira taking him as a consort made her sick. When Moira appeared at her doorstep forty-two years ago, the witch demanded her beauty to charm the man she wanted. Not even the strongest love potion could work; the shape of Moira's features were such that they couldn't be improved by cosmetics. The spell would wear off in several hours, days at most. Only by taking another body could Moira succeed in looking beautiful.

For some reason, the idea of Moira making Gerald her consort terrified her more than the witch possessing her body. Sybil clenched her teeth. But what could she do? Without magic, without spells, she was powerless against the witch.

“Hurry.” Moira sounded impatient. “If you don’t cooperate, I’ll drag you by your hair.”

“You wouldn’t dare to do that,” Sybil said, raising her chin. She wasn’t going to cower in front of this witch. “If you seize my hair and pull it out by roots, my looks will be affected when you turn me back. And you don’t want an imperfect body.”

“Then I’ll use another way.” Moira’s fingertips glowed with crimson sparks. Like Sorcha, the witch also had an amulet glowing in front of her chest. She muttered a few words—the sparks flew toward Sybil, swirling around her feet. An invisible force propelled her forward. She struggled, but it was like a giant pushing her back. If she didn’t move, she’d fall flat on her face. “Now march, de la Roche.”

Forced by magic, Sybil floated through the air like a duck bobbing on a pond. Through the cave they went, and to her surprise, the tunnel opened into a stone dwelling. The mouth of the cave was the dwelling’s entrance.

They arrived in a circular room with stone walls and three doors of different colors. Moira went to the door in the middle and opened it. She motioned with her fingers, and Sybil floated through the door, into a large room that was surprisingly warm. A fire burned in a huge fireplace, accounting for the temperature. At the end of a room stood a cell made of iron bars, and behind the cell sat an emaciated old man, held by chains.

“Who’s that?” Sybil croaked. Her bindings may have hampered her movements, but she could talk.

Moira went to the cell and tapped on the bars. “Father, wake up. Father! Do you hear me? I need more power from you. Wake up this instant!”

It was as if lightning struck. Sybil stared at the old man, speechless. Moira was calling this man her father, hence this man had to be Urdu. He looked nothing like the all-powerful mage Gerald described. His face was thin and haggard, his skin looked papery and dry, and his eyes were hollow, sunken. He looked like he was near death. A black thing shaped like a bowl was attached to his chest. A long black tube ran from the bowl, ending in a large glass jar, which was half-full of a shimmering silver liquid.

When Moira rattled on the bars, Urdu slowly opened his eyes. “Wha...what?” he said thickly.

“He’s ill,” Sybil said, glad that her voice was strong and fearless. “Can’t you see he needs treatment?”

“Quiet!” Moira hissed. “He’ll be well once I see fit to release him. Father.” She crouched and spoke to him in a gentle voice. “Please. Give me just enough magic for one last spell, and I promise I’ll free you. You did so much for me when you brought me back after that horrible battle with mages. Do this one thing for me, and I’ll set you free.”

The truth dawned. Somehow Moira had captured her father and made him supply her with his magic. Sybil had read enough books on magic that she knew a mage could transfer his power to another, including humans. But the practice was generally frowned upon. While a mage could recuperate his magic after the transfer, if he went overboard and transferred too much magic, he would become sick or even die.

This was why Moira and Sorcha wore amulets. They drew magic from their father and stored it in their amulets.

This was why Urdu couldn’t be found. He wasn’t hiding because he didn’t want to face his criminal daughter; he was kidnapped and kept against his will.

Footsteps approached. Sorcha entered the room and glanced at Sybil. “Haven’t you removed her curse?”

“Can’t do it right now,” Moira said. “The jar is only half full. Go and see if there’s enough to perform the spell.”

Muttering and complaining, Sorcha opened the cell and approached Urdu. The mage looked like he could barely move; he didn’t even see Sybil.

Hot, prickly anger rose within Sybil. How could they do this to their own father?

Sorcha removed the black tube and weighed the jar of silver liquid in her hands. “There’s only enough for one complex spell,” she said, frowning. “The jar needs to be full for two spells. You can remove her curse now, but you’ll have to wait till the old man recuperates. Then you can take her body.”

“I don’t know how long that will take,” Moira snarled, gesturing at Urdu. “Look at the old man; he’s so drained that getting more magic from him could take months. If you didn’t take that human’s body, I’d have enough now.”

“I told you I couldn’t have brought them here if I wasn’t disguised as that lady’s maid,” Sorcha said indignantly. “It isn’t easy kidnapping a human and bringing her all the way to this forsaken island.”

Moira let out a noise of frustration. “I’m not going to quarrel with you and waste time. Look, it ought to be simpler to just get another attractive human girl than wait for Father to recuperate. We can dispose of her.”

Fear rippled through Sybil’s mind. Was she going to die tonight?

“Wait,” Sorcha said hurriedly. She seemed like she’d rather not risk traveling back to the continent. “There’s another way out of this. You don’t have to use any magic to make her regain her beauty.”

Moira frowned. “Do you mean...break the curse by a proposal of marriage?” She let out a sniff of disdain. “I know you’re daft, but I didn’t expect you’d be this stupid. No way is the prince attracted to her.”

Sorcha shrugged. “Believe it or not, sis. I’ve been observing them, and the Savon prince treats her better than any other woman. There was a ball for Iliana’s birthday, and guess what he did? After dancing long enough to be polite, he went up to her room. He sought her company when he could’ve been dancing with any number of pretty ladies.”

Moira looked stunned. Her yellow gaze swung toward Sybil and rested on her face. “Impossible.”

“Why not bring him and see if it’ll work?”

Moira was still staring at Sybil. Her brows drew deeper, as if contemplating it was worth trying, even if she didn’t believe that Gerald might be interested in this gray, scale-covered face.

“Remove her gloves,” she ordered. “Let him perceive her as she looks now.”

Five minutes later, Sybil was brought to another room—this one looked cozier than the one that kept Urdu captive. It had a low sofa, rugs, and a giant fireplace that kept the room as warm as balmy spring.

Sorcha snapped her fingers and Sybil’s feet walked to the sofa. The next second, Moira came in with Gerald. Magic propelled Gerald to walk across the room and sit next to Sybil.

“Are you all right?” Gerald said, gazing at Sybil. “Did they try anything on you?”

“I’m fine. They’re keeping Urdu in the other room,” she said as quickly as she could. “Gerald, listen. Whatever they ask you, don’t answer. Don’t say...”

“Quiet!” Moira hissed. Crimson sparks flew at Sybil’s mouth, and her voice died away. No matter how she tried to speak, no sound came out.

“Your Highness,” Sorcha said. “My sister wants to have Lady de la Roche’s body. I’m sure you wouldn’t want anything to happen to her.”

Gerald glared. “Let her go. You,” he addressed Moira, “you can have me, but let her go. She doesn’t deserve to die.”

Something like interest gleamed in Moira’s eyes. “So you care for her that much? So much that you’re willing to sacrifice your freedom for her?”

Sybil shook her head frantically, seeing where Moira was heading. The witch was going to coax Gerald to declare his affection, and then the curse would be removed. Under any other circumstances, she would’ve yearned for this moment, but knowing that she’d lose her life once she was beautiful again, she couldn’t have Gerald uttering those fateful words.

Gerald opened his mouth, but Sybil stomped on his foot. If she couldn’t speak, she had to do other things to stop him from falling into Moira’s trap.

He grunted in pain and looked at her. Puzzlement was conveyed in his gaze. But all she could do was shake her head, praying that he got the message.

“Your Highness,” Sorcha said. “Have you heard of the custom of polygamy? In my mother’s tribe, it is acceptable for a man to take more than one wife, or a woman to have several husbands.”

Both Gerald and Sybil stared. Even Moira raised an eyebrow, but she said nothing.

“My sister isn’t as ruthless as she seems,” Sorcha continued. She held up a hand at Moira, as if telling her not to interfere. “If you truly care for Lady de la Roche, my sister will not object if you take her as your wife, as well as my sister. That is, my sister takes the position of the first wife, of course.”

The situation was so ridiculous that Sybil might have laughed. But at the same time, anxiety filled her. Would Gerald be willing to agree to this ludicrous proposition, as long as he could save Sybil’s life?

“Very well,” Moira said, spreading her hands as if to say, “I’m granting you a boon.”

“Well?” Sorcha said. “What do you say, young prince? Marry them both, and Lady de la Roche stays alive. If you do not agree, my sister will

dispose of her."

Gerald hesitated. Sybil tried to stomp on his foot again, but Sorcha pointed a finger and she found she couldn't move.

"Stop trying to influence his decision," she hissed. "I don't see why you are complaining. You were gazing at him with starstruck eyes at the palace."

Gerald glanced at her, astonishment reflected in his eyes. Apparently, while she found it difficult that he might love her, he also found it impossible that she would love him.

"What do you say?" Sorcha said. "All you have to do is propose, and we can have the wedding performed tonight."

"I need time," Gerald said finally. "Marriage is for life. I cannot agree to it when you suddenly make that request. Allow me some time to think it over."

"What?" Sorcha spluttered. "You would rather consider the option of her dying than wedding two women? Most men would jump at the opportunity to have more than one wife."

Gerald shook his head. "I need time to think it over," he repeated. There was suspicion in his eyes as he looked at the sisters.

Relief coursed through Sybil's mind.

Moira looked irritated as she glanced at her sister. "Perhaps we'd better dispose of de la Roche."

"Sis, there's no hurry," Sorcha said. "Let them stay for a few days; it isn't as if they can escape from this island. The barrier spells around the island will keep others from discovering it. And sis, it's been a long day. We can rest and decide on what to do tomorrow."

Moira glared. "I am not a patient person. If the prince doesn't give a satisfactory reply in three days, I'm tossing de la Roche into the sea."

CHAPTER 33

Gerald was surprised that the witches made him share a room with Sybil for the night.

"There aren't enough spare rooms," Sorcha had growled, when he commented on the inappropriateness. "Does it even matter? I know you wouldn't mind spending the night with her. I daresay it's even easier when you can't see her in the dark."

Indignation rose in Gerald's mind; if they weren't trapped on the island and had to rely on the sisters for survival, he would have sunk a fist in her stomach.

Keeping his temper down, he said, "I can sleep outside in the public area. All I need is a blanket to keep from freezing to death."

Sybil remained impassive. She was unusually quiet; the way she pursed her lips and wrinkled her brow made him believe she was contemplating. Hopefully she had devised a way to escape, no matter how hopeless it seemed.

Sorcha made a noise of irritation and pushed him into the room. "Be glad that you have a place to sleep, princeling. If it weren't for your pretty face, my sister would've locked you in the cell with my father."

A thud came beside him, as Sybil was also pushed into the room. It was small, stuffy, with only two mattresses, blankets, and a small lamp burning in a corner. The floor and walls were all stone. The door slammed shut. A click indicated that Sorcha had locked it.

"She needn't bother," Sybil said quietly. "As if we can go anywhere on this island."

She sat on a mattress, spreading her gown around her, careful not to cause rips and tears to the fabric. With her sharp claws, it was all too easy to damage her clothes.

“The ship might still be there,” Gerald said, settling on the mattress next to her. “If they don’t magically bind us tomorrow, we can slip away and see if there’s a chance.”

Sybil shook her head. “Unlikely. If Sorcha took the trouble to lock us in, she would’ve made sure to destroy our means of escape.” She scratched one of her horns, a gesture he found amusing despite their current circumstances. “Listen. When Moira took me into that room, I found Urdu was there.”

His chest tightened. He was relieved that the mage was found, but on the other hand, from Sybil’s expression, Urdu’s presence didn’t seem comforting.

“Is he unwilling to help us?”

“Worse. He looks like he might die any moment.” She briefly told him about what she saw—Urdu shut away in a cell and his magic sucked away from his body.

Gerald couldn’t believe what he was hearing. But Sybil had no reason to lie to him.

“We have to save him,” she said, her voice low but firm. “He won’t survive if Moira drains him again. Fortunately there isn’t enough magic to perform the spells, so she has to wait.”

“Not enough magic?”

“Moira was chastising Sorcha for using a large amount of magic to possess Victoire’s body.” Her shoulders shook, and he glimpsed a rare moment of vulnerability. Sybil, who was always so strong, or rather hated to reveal weakness, was devastated. She lost her maid—a young woman who had been with her for decades. “She was young. She should have the chance to enjoy life, but she was stuck with me because of the curse. And now she will never have the chance to be free.”

Her lip quivered. Perhaps because it was Victoire’s death had overwhelmed her, or perhaps the uncertain future and dangerous situation they were in unnerved her. A tear glistened in her silver eye, and next thing he knew, Gerald was pulling her into his arms and whispering into her hair.

“It’s not your fault, Sybil. You couldn’t have prevented it.”

“It’s...so...unfair.”

“It is,” he agreed. “And to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen again, we need to come up with a plan. We’ve got to escape.”

She nodded against his chest, which caused one of her horns poke into his chin. She pulled away, apologizing, but he smiled and shook his head.

“Those witches don’t know anything,” he said, setting his hands on her shoulders. “You’re not hideous, Sybil. They’re the ones who are ugly beyond redemption. No matter whose body they occupy.”

Sybil laughed. There was something endearing about her expression, something tender and sweet and enticing that caused a strong, powerful emotion to rise in his chest. Without thinking, he threaded his fingers through her hair and lowered his head.

Their lips met.

For a blissful moment, Gerald forgot everything around him. She had the face of a demon, but her lips were soft and warm, making him feel like he was floating on clouds. When he was younger, a maid had stolen a kiss from him—he felt nothing but shock and surprise; he barely remembered what it felt like, as it was so brief. But this kiss with Sybil, without a shadow of doubt, would leave a lasting impression.

And then she pushed him away with an alarmed cry. Fear flashed through her silver eyes—why would she be afraid? She raised her hands and looked at them—she patted her head and felt her horns.

“Do I look all right? Has anything changed?”

Bemused, he shook his head. “I’m sorry, Sybil. That was…” *One of the best moments of my life?* “...uncalled for. I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you while you were grieving.”

This time she shook her head. A wry smile appeared. “Moira would say I’m the one who took advantage of you.”

“Don’t say that,” he said, feeling frustrated. “I’ve told you before, and I’ll tell you again—you’re not ugly. Your face doesn’t scare me. Don’t feel you’re inferior to me, Sybil.”

But she had already retreated—mentally. An invisible veil fell over her, cloaking her emotions. When she spoke, her tone took on the familiar quality—cold and formal.

“We’re trapped on this island, and Moira wouldn’t like it if you treat me with more than friendship. I’d wager of all the consorts she had, you’re the best-looking one.”

“If she did, she wouldn’t have put us in the same room.”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “You don’t understand. Anyway…” She put a hand on her forehead. “We’ve got to come up with a plan. Once Urdu’s magic is replenished, she will drain him and take my body.”

The thought of her dying filled him with dread. He wanted to hold her, but since she pushed him away, he took her hand instead. “I can’t let you die.” He tried to think, to come up with something workable. “Suppose we try to return to shore tomorrow, and see if the ship is truly sunk. If not...” He drew out the Peerless Knife. “This is a formidable weapon. We used it to break that ancient curse placed on my ancestors. I’m well trained in combat. If the timing is right, I can take them by surprise.”

“Can I see it?”

He passed the knife to her. “Careful.”

Slowly, she drew out the knife.

The black blade was shiny and polished in the dim light of the lamp. She sheathed the knife and looked up at him. “This may be our last hope. Still, if they let us out tomorrow, we can explore the island and see if there’s anything that may aid us.”

* * *

SURPRISINGLY, Moira allowed them to roam freely for the next few days. Gerald supposed that it had to do with her arrogance—she assumed that they had no chance of escaping the island. As Sorcha had destroyed the ship, it did seem impossible. Sybil didn’t know how to swim, and even Gerald, a decent swimmer, didn’t have confidence he’d be able to reach another island, given the distance. And even if he got on another island...so what? They’d still be unable to get home. And then there was Urdu. They had to bring him too, not only because they needed him, but because he would die without proper care.

More surprisingly, Moira also allowed that Sybil be with him at all times. Wouldn’t she worry that he and Sybil would plot their escape together? Was she truly so arrogant, so confident, that she didn’t believe they had a chance to plot an ambush? Whatever the reason, Gerald was thankful for it anyway. With Sybil by his side, he was more optimistic,

more hopeful. Better than being separated from her and trying to think how to rescue her and Urdu.

“I think we should target Sorcha,” Sybil said, three days after they arrived on the island. They were walking along the shore, the waves crashing just a few yards away, while gulls soared ahead. For a moment, he envisioned a life with Sybil, away from people gawking at him, and spending his time with her in front of a fireplace, with hot chocolate and books. That proposal of hers sprang into mind, all of a sudden warm and enticing.

“She’s weaker than Moira. If we can attack her and make her help us… we might have a chance. What do you think?”

“It sounds too risky.” Gerald ran a hand through his hair. “I’m thinking I can destroy their amulet with the Peerless Knife. Without the source of magic, both of them should be powerless. I’ll use the combat skills I have from fighting trolls, and have them surrender in no time.”

“They’re half-mages; they ought to have some innate magic as well,” Sybil said. “They need Urdu’s power because the transformation spell requires too much, but even without his power, they are still more powerful than us combined.”

Gerald shut his eyes for a moment. If they couldn’t attack the sisters and couldn’t leave the island, what could they do? Three days on the island, and they had discovered it was devoid of humans, unlike the southern islands. Either Moira deliberately picked an empty island or drove the original inhabitants away.

“The best chance we have is attacking them from a long distance,” Sybil said, after a while. She kicked on a small rock and watched it bounce over the barren ground. “There’s a bow and arrows in one of the rooms. Sorcha has been using it to hunt game. If I can shoot at them from a distance that’s far enough, they might not be able to reach me with their magic. Have you trained in long-distance combat?”

“Often,” Gerald said. “When you’re battling a seven-foot troll, it’s safer to attack him from afar than grappling with him in close body contact.”

“Good.” Sybil stopped and looked around, as if afraid that either witch was lurking nearby, listening. “Let’s form a plan on how to take them down from the longest distance possible.”

They discussed tactics for a while. Gerald suggested that he ask Moira to stroll in the woods with him, maybe say that he was willing to bargain with her for Sybil's freedom. Once they were in the woods, Sybil could release her arrows, aiming for the amulet.

"If only I had Alix's invisibility cloak," he said. "Then I could definitely attack Moira with a hundred percent chance of success."

"There's an invisibility cloak in existence?" Sybil said, surprised. She had read about them in books, but always thought they were either made up or were long lost in history.

"Yes." Gerald told her about how Alix came into possession of the cloak, and how she used it to save them from the trolls. "Right now she's in the Savon castle, working with my brother. Alix wants to find a way to slip back to the trolls' lair to gather their real names, so we can use them in the countercurse and send them back to where they belong."

"But you mentioned there are more than two hundred trolls down there," Sybil said. "How is she going to find out the real names of every single one of them?"

"Freja is going to help her with that, once we take care of Moira." Gerald glanced in the direction of the cave dwelling. Smoke rose from somewhere near the front. He wondered whether it was real smoke, or the witches were cooking up another spell. "If we can take down Moira, then Freja will be able to concentrate on producing the countercurse. She's been doing too much already."

Sybil stepped closer and laid a hand on his arm. "We'll fight. I'd rather die before letting Moira possess my body."

He hated to hear her mention death. He wanted to take her hands, reassure her that he wouldn't let any harm come to her. But he couldn't. Sybil was no child; she'd see through a pathetic attempt to console her.

So he chose to say something else.

Gripping her hands, he looked into her eyes. The silver color would be eerie to many, but he had looked upon those eyes so many times, the color felt as natural as blue or brown to him.

"Sybil, just in case that anything unexpected or disastrous happens, I need you to know something." He tightened his grip on her hands, drawing her near. "I love you. If we end up making back to the continent alive, will you marry me?"

He had expected shock. Or delight. But definitely not horror. Yet from how she gaped and tried to pull away, he couldn’t imagine how she’d be horrified at the prospect of marrying him, especially when she had proposed to him just a couple weeks earlier.

“I rejected your proposal last time, but I was too shocked as the thought never crossed my mind. But now, nothing is clearer. When Moira said she wanted your body, I felt like she was going to rip away a part of me. I can’t imagine a life without you in it, Sybil. Marry me.”

CHAPTER 34

Silence.

Sybil was staring at him, her silver eyes wide, and the rest of her body seemed frozen in shock. Gerald was beginning to feel like a fool, when a brilliant flash of white engulfed Sybil and her hand burned like fire. He let go, astonished, as the spectacle unfolded in front of him. A white mist surrounded her, she was lifted several inches off the ground, her eyes tightly closed.

"Sybil! Sybil?"

Her arm shot out, pointing to the sky. He stood transfixed, as the pointed claws of her paw retracted and turned pink and shrank, until it was identical to a human hand. The same thing occurred to her feet—they shrunk to a dainty size that would've fit any lady's slippers.

Then the white mist swirled and thinned—revealing her head. She came to stand on the ground with both feet. Her mane of raven black hair fell like a glossy waterfall in front of her, the tips brushing the ground. When she threw back her hair and raised her face to his, he gasped.

"Sybil?"

He had never seen a woman more beautiful than she. Porcelain complexion, blue-black eyes that sparkled like diamonds, lips shaped like a crimson rosebud, and her features as symmetrical as if they were calculated by a mathematician. He had seen her in a canvas, back in the portrait gallery at home, but seeing her in flesh was a thousand times more dazzling. He swallowed, finding his throat dry, and dug his fingernails into his palm. Pain registered, telling him he wasn't dreaming.

“By the magi.” Sybil raised her hands and looked at her fingers. The claws had vanished, replaced by fingernails the color of pink shells. “It can’t be…it happened…I…I’m back.”

Gerald found his voice. “The curse is broken. But how? What did I do?”

“You proposed.” Sybil lifted her foot and inspected her toes, revealing her long, shapely legs under her skirts. Gerald blushed—he had never seen a woman show her skin above her ankles. “That was what Moira specified. She couldn’t believe a man would offer marriage to an ugly woman, so she placed the curse on me. Forty-two years...oh my...” Then she hid her face with both hands. “By the magi, I never thought you’d propose. What are we going to do now?”

For a second he was confused—why was she distressed about returning to her human self? And then it hit him: Moira. The witch let Sybil live because there wasn’t enough magic to perform two big, complex spells: removing Sybil’s curse and taking her body. But now that Sybil was human, without any effort from Moira, the witch could perform the transformation, just as Sorcha took Victoire.

“We need a veil. Quick.” He drew out the Peerless Knife and cut off a piece of cloth from his tunic. “Moira can’t see your face, or she’d take your body in an instant.”

“They’ll find out, sooner or later.” Sybil took the piece of cloth and tied it around her head. “How do I look?”

Unfortunately, the veil wasn’t much use. Her horns were gone, and her eyes were brilliant blue instead of silver. The veil only covered the lower part of her face, which wasn’t enough.

“We have to follow the plan,” Sybil said. “As soon as Moira comes looking for us and sees me...I’ll be dead.”

Her voice was the same, thankfully. The truth be told, Gerald didn’t feel elated that she was transformed back to a beautiful woman (apart from being glad for her sake). He was used to her demon face; it felt like he was facing a stranger. But once she spoke, in the voice and tone he knew so well, the old familiarity returned. It would take time, but he’d learn to see her as the beast he admired and loved.

“I’ll protect you with my life,” he said, the words coming out as natural as sunrise. “I’m not going to lose you, not after the short time

we've had together. That picture you painted about married life? I want to *live* it, Sybil."

She smiled—a brilliant, radiant smile that eclipsed the landscape around her. For that moment, he understood why men had been wild about her before she was cursed.

"Let's do this."

* * *

GERALD HEADED BACK to the cave dwelling, trying to calm his nerves. It had been months since he was this nervous, ever since he didn't have to go underground and face the trolls. There was so much evil in this world. Even without the old foes, the witch sisters were equally frightening.

In his mind, he ran through the plan and prayed that nothing would go wrong. Once this was over, he told himself, he would be together with Sybil.

Back in the cave dwelling, the sisters were channeling Urdu's magic from the jar into their amulets.

"Not an ounce more," Moira snapped, ripping away Sorcha's amulet and shoving it into her hands. "You used an inordinate amount when you took that servant's body."

"I braved the continent and brought back those two humans while you were idling away here," Sorcha muttered, but she fastened the amulet around her neck.

Gerald wanted to check on Urdu's condition, but he had to act on the plan first. As he stepped into the room, the sisters looked up.

"What're you here for?" Sorcha said, with a grin. "Decided that the demon wench wasn't worth your time and come to seek our company instead?"

"If this is about begging for your freedom, save your breath," Moira said sharply. "What is it you want?"

"I need help," he said, feigning an expression of fear and anxiety. It was an expression that came naturally to him during the troll-curse days. "Sybil's injured. We need to help her. Not in the face," he added, seeing the look of concern in Sorcha's eyes, "but she was bitten on the leg by a fox. I've got to kill the creature and I can't do it with bare hands."

“A fox?” Moira said, a suspicious glint in her yellow eyes. Foxes were rampant on the island, but most of them scampered off when Gerald and Sybil approached. Either they were naturally shy or were bullied by the sisters.

“How could she be so stupid?”

“She accidentally came across one in his den,” Gerald said, looking around. “I don’t have time to talk to you now; she’s lying there, wounded, and if we don’t act fast and get her back, a pack might arrive.”

“Foxes don’t move in packs,” Moira said.

A tingle of alarm rang through him, but he forced himself to stay calm. “Well, that’s a relief, but I must bring her back to rest.” He spied the bow and arrow hanging on a wall. “Mind if I borrow this?”

Without waiting for an answer, he grabbed the bow and quiver. “I’ll be right back.”

“Wait,” Moira said. “Sorcha, go with him.”

It wasn’t the ideal scenario he hoped for, but he wasn’t going to complain. “Let’s go.”

Heading to the forest, where trees were plentiful and offered much for hiding, he searched for the white birch tree Sybil would be hiding behind. He gave a shrill whistle and tossed the bow in her direction.

“Where is she?” Sorcha said, starting to look suspicious.

“Over here.” Sybil stepped out from behind the tree. Her hair streamed behind her like a banner, her eyes glittered like black diamonds. If she were nervous, she hid it well.

Sorcha gasped. “So you have transformed back!” She gave a loud, high-pitched giggle. “I just knew it! Throwing the two of you together did the trick! When did he propo…”

Her voice died away when Sybil raised the bow and aimed at the amulet glowing on her chest.

Decades of practice showed in her skill. The arrow pinged on the amulet—Gerald admired how Sybil managed to hit it while standing far away. But while her aim was true, the amulet was too powerful. The arrow slid to the ground, while the amulet looked like nothing had touched it.

“How dare you!” Sorcha screamed. She pressed her hand on the glowing amulet; magic unfurled from her fingers and sped toward Sybil, who ducked behind the birch tree. The tree burst into flames.

“Are you crazy?” Gerald shouted. “Harm her and your sister won’t be able to get the human body she wants.”

Sorcha paused as the meaning of his words sank in. Using the precious moment of her hesitation, Gerald leaped forward. But Sybil was faster. Her second arrow came whizzing through the air, embedding in Sorcha’s thigh. The witch let out a screech and stumbled. Afraid that she’d attack with more magic, Gerald unsheathed the Peerless Knife and set it on her throat.

“Move one inch, and my knife will slice your throat apart,” he said. His voice was as calm as if he was announcing the weather. “You’d do well to listen, for this knife is enchanted.”

Sorcha’s finger twitched, but at the word “enchanted,” she stopped.

“You think you’re smart for attacking me,” she whispered. “But you still have to deal with my sister. She won’t be as easy to deal with.”

Gerald made a deft cut on the chain around her neck; the amulet fell into his waiting hand. “Easier than dealing with the two of you at the same time.”

Sybil came out from behind the tree and cautiously approached them.

Sorcha glared at her with hatred, but also with the slightest bit of admiration. “I see why my sister chose you,” she said grudgingly. “The princess of Arksar’s no match. Wish I had taken your body instead of your maid’s.”

The mention of Victoire brought fire to Sybil’s eyes. “I should kill you,” she said. “For taking the life of my maid, my constant companion and dearest friend.”

“Not now.” Gerald laid a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll use her as leverage to make her sister agree to our freedom.”

“You supposed wrong,” a voice sneered. “Do you think I’d agree when I have worked for so many years for a new body?”

Icy dread slid down his spine. Gerald turned. Moira had arrived, her yellow eyes gleaming.

Without thinking, he threw the knife at her. She pressed a hand on her amulet, and with her other hand, flung out a bolt of magic.

There was the sound of an explosion, sparks flew in the air, and the knife fell on the ground.

“That wasn’t too bad,” Moira said, rubbing her arm. She snapped her fingers, and the same ropes that bound them before appeared again. Gerald flung out his hands, but the ropes were too fast. In no time he was trussed

up, and no matter how he struggled, the most he could move were his fingers. Sybil was also tied up, the bow had dropped to the ground, and the arrows spilled over the snow. Clearly, Moira was much stronger than her sister.

“I knew something was amiss when you grabbed the bow and quiver,” Moira said to Gerald. “But I decided to wait and see what you were up to, so I sent Sorcha to go with you. As I expected, you attacked her.” She lifted her arm and beckoned. Forced by the magic, Sybil stumbled toward the witch, her long hair rippling down her front.

“So.” Moira laid a clawed finger under Sybil’s chin and raised her face. “So you have cast off the curse. Glad to see that your beauty hasn’t diminished one iota, though I didn’t expect it would happen, or happen so fast.”

She let go of Sybil’s chin. “Sorcha suggested to put you two in the same room, let you spend as much time together as possible. She believed that it would lead to romance between you two, and end up breaking the curse so I wouldn’t have to waste magic. I didn’t have her optimism, but now I see I was wrong. What did he see in you? I cannot believe he actually proposed to you. Had you used a love potion?”

“Let me go and I’ll tell you.”

“Let her go and I’ll tell you.”

Sybil looked toward Gerald and shook her head. Gerald, however, wasn’t content to stay silent. “Contrary to your belief, Moira, it IS possible to develop feelings for a person, even if she may appear unattractive in your eyes.”

“I don’t believe it,” Moira said, her voice rising to a pitch so high that Gerald wanted to cover his ears. “Impossible! Men—they all ran away screaming when they saw me. Including that good-for-nothing king. He even tried to have me killed. I was glad when I cursed his son to death; I wanted him to pay for my suffering. Only when I resided in the body of a beautiful woman did they notice me. Oh, the difference it makes!” She threw back her head and her laugh echoed through the air, like a crow’s. “They were fighting with each other just to see me smile. I know that once I have a face like yours—” she caressed the side of Sybil’s face “—I will have every man at my feet.”

“Not me,” Gerald said through clenched teeth. “I’d never worship a ruthless witch who chains up her father and claims innocent lives. No

matter how you look, you'll never replace Sybil."

A cold, hard, flinty look came over Moira's face. Her lip twisted; steam came through her nostrils. She didn't look anything human at that moment; only a spitting fire that seemed bent on destruction.

"It matters little to me of your opinion," she said, and waved her hand. Gerald felt an invisible gag squeeze into his mouth; he tried to speak, but no words came out. "As a punishment for speaking to me in this brazen manner, you shall stand by while I take her body. And once her body is mine, you shall become my consort, whether you like it or not."

Panic and fear seized him, but he couldn't move. Couldn't even speak.

Sybil spoke up. "Please." Her voice was quiet, small. It was rare, but Gerald couldn't believe it—Sybil, usually proud and unwilling to show weakness—was begging. She was willing to beg for his sake. "Moira, take my body. I know it's hopeless. But please, don't force Gerald to do anything he doesn't want. As you said, once you have my face, you'll have countless suitors begging for your attention. Why force yourself to make him yield?"

"Most of the men who desire this face are uncouth, repulsive creatures who disgust me. It is the rare ones like him—" Moira pointed at Gerald "—that I want. So quit dictating to me what to do, de la Roche. Forty-two years ago, you rejected my request to possess you, and see what you've ended up with. Forty-two years trapped as a hideous beast, and you're losing your body as well as your lover."

Moira turned to her sister. "Pick up that knife and bring them into the dwelling. We shall perform the spell immediately."

CHAPTER 35

Sybil closed her eyes for a second as magic dragged her to the cave. In a moment she'd be dead. She'd join Victoire on the other side, both of them meeting the same fate. A faint smile played on her lips—funny how that she could still smile when she was going to die. She still didn't regret she left home; in fact, if it meant she had to run into Moira again, it was still better than wasting her age-frozen life in the manor, living a life without meaning, without hope.

But what she regretted was bringing Gerald into this mess. He was young—he didn't deserve to be forced into a hellish life with Moira. As if he were a conquest, a gift from a defeated war. There were myths of dragons carrying off princesses; this time it was a witch making a prince her property.

There was a tiny sliver of happiness, despite the fate that awaited them. Gerald had fallen in love with her and made her an offer of marriage —*when she was in her beast form.* He had proven Moira was wrong. And so, as she stumbled over a rock, she resolved not to give up hope. Until she died, she'd fight for every chance to set him free.

In the cave, Moira made her stand against the wall. Sybil struggled one last time, knowing that resistance was futile, but to her surprise, the ropes binding her wrists came loose.

"Sorcha!" Moira looked irritated. "Haven't you any magic left in your amulet to restrain this wench? I need to conserve enough in mine to perform the body transformation."

Sorcha, who had just entered with Gerald towed behind her, fingered her own amulet.

“Hold it!” Sybil shouted. “Before you take my body, I have one last request. I need to do something before I die.”

Sorcha bristled. “She’s trying to buy time, sister.”

“Whatever tactic she’s using, it won’t stop me from taking her body.” Moira patted Gerald’s arm. “What is it that you want? To say farewell with your lover?”

Sybil licked her lips. “I want a drink.”

Everyone stared at her, including Gerald. His expression was filled with shock, and he mouthed, “What are you doing?”

Sybil dared not communicate with him in any way. “I...I’m afraid,” she whispered, looking down on the ground. “I don’t want to be conscious when the spell is performed. I want a sedative to put myself to sleep before you do it.”

“She’s scheming,” Sorcha cried. “Ignore her and get the spell ready, sis.”

Moira crossed her arms. “As a matter of fact, it isn’t a bad idea. Remember how previous transformations were conducted? That last one—what was her name? She was struggling and screaming so loudly, we had to expend extra energy to keep her immobilized for the spell. I’ll keep her feet bound and the prince on the other side of the room. She can’t do anything.”

With barely veiled reluctance, Sorcha got a glass of water. Drawing magic from her amulet, the water swirled and turned white, then back to transparent. She handed it to Sybil with a twisted expression. “You’d do well to thank us that we’re granting you one last wish.”

Sybil smiled—for a moment Sorcha froze, temporarily struck by her beauty.

“I should’ve taken your body,” Sorcha said, with a baleful look at Moira. “No man can resist a face like yours.”

Sybil closed her fingers around the glass, but she didn’t drink. “Gerald,” she said softly. “After I’m gone, promise me you’ll find someone you love. I’m glad that I’ve met you, but it’s time we said goodbye.”

“No,” he gritted out, his eyes wild. “Don’t drink it, Sybil. Even if they take your body, it won’t be you.”

Sorcha made a retching noise. “Are you done with your mushy last words?”

Sybil took a deep breath. Raising the glass, she smashed it into the wall behind her. Blood trickled between her fingers, but she barely felt the pain. Grasping the largest shard from the shattered glass, she pointed it on her cheek and pierced her skin, letting a drop of blood run down her face, landing on her collarbone.

“Let him go,” she said, her voice deadly calm. “Release him, or I’ll ruin my face with the largest scar you’ve ever seen. Even if you possess my body, you’ll be getting a damaged face.”

“Sybil, no!” Gerald shouted.

Sorcha looked like she wanted to kill her. Moira, however, merely raised an eyebrow. “Bargaining with me, de la Roche? For a woman who’s known for her beauty, it’s a surprise that you have brains too.”

Sybil ignored her. “Let him leave the island. Now.”

Moira laughed. “And let him bring the other mages to hunt me down? De la Roche, you prize yourself more highly than what you’re truly worth for. If you injure your face, I have only to capture another maiden. When you’re no use to me, I’ll still kill you. So go ahead and cut yourself; your bargain means little to me.”

Sybil’s heart plummeted. She could scar herself, but if Moira didn’t care, she’d only endanger another hapless victim. But capturing another would require time and effort, not to mention magic, and perhaps she’d have time to plan her escape by then.

But her chances looked bleak: as long as Moira and Sorcha remained, how were she and Gerald to escape? Neither of them were capable of constructing a boat. Even without the witches, they’d be left to survive on the island and...

An invisible hand squeezed her wrist so hard that the shard slipped from her fingers and hit the floor.

“There.” Moira removed her finger from the amulet, where she was channeling the magic. “Now force that sedative down her throat, sis. We’ve wasted enough time.”

“Sybil!” Gerald yelled. “Don’t you dare touch her! You can have me. I’ll do anything you want, just don’t harm her!”

“Quiet,” Moira hissed. “I haven’t thought of your punishment yet, young prince, but if you keep distracting me, I’ll come up with some very creative ideas.”

“I promise to serve you if you leave her alone,” Gerald said. “I loved her long before she turned back to her human self. You don’t need to occupy her body in order to gain a man’s affection.”

Moira paused, but then she shook her head. “Sorcha, take him out of the room. I need to perform the spell now.”

“No!” Gerald yelled.

At that moment, a whizzing sound occurred. A rain of darts flew through the air, each of them aiming for a vital point of Moira’s body. The witch cursed and fingered the amulet, calling on the magic contained within. A shield appeared, glittering, transparent like a bubble, and the darts bounced to the floor.

Sybil turned her head. Standing in the entrance of the room was Julong. Balanced between his fingers were more darts, eight in total. Behind him was Lorenza, who looked murderous. She muttered a magical word, and Gerald moved. He raced to Sybil. Sorcha threw out a bolt of magic, tripping him.

“Bind her!” Lorenza shouted, raising her arms. Magic lashed out, wrapping around Sorcha, as if she were an insect in a spider’s web. The witch fell to the floor with a thud. She hit her head against the table leg and passed out.

Gerald picked himself up from the floor and ran to Sybil. “Are you all right?” he asked anxiously. “Can you run?”

“My feet...” She didn’t finish, for he swept her up in his arms and carried her to Lorenza. “Her feet are bound, Lady Lorenza. Please free her from the bonds.”

He didn’t even finish before the enchanted ropes around her feet fell away. Without thinking, Sybil threw her arms around him and held him close.

“When did you arrive? How did you find us?” Gerald asked Lorenza.

“We’ve been circling the waters and Julong sensed a huge magic barrier in this area. We’ve been trying to break through the barrier for days.” Lorenza wiped her forehead. “Today we succeeded.”

Meanwhile, Julong was engaged in battle with Moira. Although he couldn’t see, he knew where to hurl and throw his weapons, by listening to her movements. His darts rained down on her shield, forcing her to retreat farther and farther, until she fingered her amulet and shouted a few words.

The shield she cast vanished. The darts, which were flying in her direction, suddenly paused and pelted toward them.

“Duck!” Lorenza shouted, throwing her arms around Julong and bringing him to the ground.

Gerald did the same to Sybil; he pushed her to the ground, covering her with his body. She wanted to yell at him for putting himself in danger for her sake, but her voice was muffled when they hit the floor.

Moira grabbed her sister’s arm, pulling Sorcha off the ground and toward her. She grasped the amulet in both hands and shouted a few magical words. Lorenza cried out, but it was too late. The witches disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Gerald blinked. “They’re gone?”

Julong inhaled slowly, then nodded. “They’re gone.”

“Thank you for saving us. You arrived just in time,” Gerald said, pushing himself up and offering Sybil his hand. “If you came a moment later, Sybil would’ve lost her life.”

“Thank you.” Sybil held out her other hand, but Lorenza didn’t take it, noticing the cut on Sybil’s palm.

“You’d better treat that wound,” she said. “How did you get hurt?”

Sybil explained, while Gerald found alcohol in another room and bandaged her wound.

When she finished, both Lorenza and Julong shook their heads.

“If only I could see,” Julong growled, in a tone that he had never used before. “She got away again. I’ve failed to avenge myself, and by letting her escape, she might look for another victim.”

“Why *did* Moira disappear?” Sybil said. “She looked like she had a good chance of winning the battle.”

“My guess is that she calculated her chances and decided it wasn’t worth to keep fighting,” Lorenza said. “There’re two of us, and she isn’t sure if we have reinforcements. Plus, she relies on that amulet to channel magic, and it probably didn’t contain enough magic for her battle.”

“How did you know she didn’t have enough magic left?” Julong said.

“She had to remove her shield before making your darts attack us,” Lorenza said, wiping her forehead. “It was a risky move. If I were her, I wouldn’t remove the shield, in case a few of those darts didn’t revert and went flying at me. This proves that she didn’t have enough magic to

maintain the shield and revert those darts. Besides, she wanted to use the rest of her magic to escape."

"A good thing she did," Julong said. "We wouldn't be able to hold out much longer either, after expending a load of energy breaking the magical barrier around the island."

"But we have reinforcements," Lorenza said. As if on cue, voices echoed through the air.

"Gerald? Gerald!"

The twins burst into the cave, both of them looking frantic with worry. They had stubble on their chins, and their blond hair was tousled and messy.

Ethan threw his arms around Gerald, while Enzo threw his arms around the two of them.

"You're alive!"

"Thank the magi!"

"Where's the dodgasted piece of scum that kidnapped you? Let me at him—I'll pummel him until he'll be wishing he had an early death."

"It's a witch that kidnapped us," Gerald said, his voice muffled.

"Us?" Ethan said.

Enzo looked around and his jaw dropped. "By the magi! It's Lady Sybil! And she's looking just as beautiful—no, ten times as lovely—as the portrait we have at home!"

"Are you serious?" Ethan pulled away from the brotherly embrace and his jaw dropped just like Enzo's.

The next second, the twins abandoned Gerald and rushed at Sybil. Both of them bowed so low that their heads could've touched their knees.

"Lady Sybil, what a delight it is to finally meet you."

Sybil suppressed the urge to tell him that they had already met when she was a beast.

"Please, allow me to escort you from this terrible place."

"Do you need anything? I shall be happy to fulfill whatever you want."

"Is that blood on your cheek? Hold still, I'll bandage it for you right away..."

She noticed Gerald rolling his eyes and resisted a smile. "Thank you, Your Highness. I do have a request."

The twins looked elated. "Your wish is my command."

"Lady, all you have to do is say the word."

She pointed to the door leading to Urdu's cell. "The mage we are seeking is in there, chained in a cell. Moira and her sister kept him prisoner, draining his magic and storing it in their amulets. Will you please get him out of his cell?"

The twins' faces fell—obviously they didn't expect Sybil to ask them to carry a man—but they bowed and assured her they would obey her orders right away.

"Are they both here?" Captain Garth entered, followed by several crew members. They all gaped at Sybil. "Who is she?"

"It's a long story, but we have a long journey back to Arksar," Gerald said. He reached out and laced his fingers through hers, with the air of a man staking his claim. "Let's go home."

CHAPTER 36

On the trip back to Arksar, the sailors were nudging and whispering, wondering where the mysterious lady came from, and when it was revealed that the woman with the veil was in fact the same person, the more it stirred their excitement.

Even the twins, knowing that Gerald and Sybil were in a serious relationship, kept pestering her with questions about her life as a beast. They were finding excuses to talk to her whenever possible—noticeably, they hadn't bothered to approach her when she was a beast. Nor did they bother Lorenza much, since the Masaro mage ceased to be the only attractive woman on board.

Sometimes she felt like putting on a veil again. It sure felt nice to have her hands and feet smooth and hairless (she definitely didn't miss the itchy, scratchy fur, though she may miss the warmth it provided), but her face was attracting way too much attention. Attention that was just as unpleasant as the kind she received when she was a beast. From the annoyed glances Gerald tossed at the men who ogled her, he was feeling the same way.

Gerald. The words of his proposal still sounded sweet when she replayed them in her mind.

What would their future be like? He would take her to the Savony castle—a prospect she wasn't relishing. The twins had mentioned there was a portrait of her in the castle gallery. How awkward it would be. Could she make up a new identity? Tell them she was Lady Sybil's granddaughter? But then she would have to cook up another story to go

with it, explain why she was missing all these years, and why there weren't any de la Roches left in the manor, etc.

Besides, the twins already knew who she was. They weren't the type who could keep a secret. They could promise they'd safeguard her secret, but it was all too easy to have a slip of the tongue over copious quantities of wine.

Let them know the truth. After all that she had been through with Gerald, she wasn't going to give him up. As long as he wanted her, she'd brave whatever challenge that came with him as a prince.

* * *

THE ARKSAN PALACE looked welcoming when they arrived in front of the massive iron gates. After being at sea, on two Finsoor islands, with subpar food and rusty baths, it was paradise to know that a hot meal and hot bath awaited. And despite the unwanted attention brought from her now-gorgeous face, Sybil was sure the king and queen would treat her with less suspicion now.

"How long will we be staying here?" she asked Gerald, when they got off the carriage. "I am grateful to King Tyrell for supporting our trip, but I want to return home as soon as I can. I need to see my servants and make sure they are all free from the curse. And also, I need to break the news about Victoire." There was still a pang of grief when she mentioned her maid.

Gerald took her hand and squeezed it gently. "I'm sure it won't be longer than necessary. I'm also eager to go home, though I'm not sure about my brothers."

They both glanced at the twins, who had got off the carriage earlier and were already chatting with an Arksan lady who happened to arrive at the palace at the same time.

"I don't understand," Sybil said, looking at him. "If your elder brother ordered that you all abstain from female company before the curse was broken, why aren't you like your brothers? Why aren't you more eager to socialize with women?"

"However egoistical it sounds, this face of mine soon made me wary and tired of female attention. There were even men who were interested in

me. All the gawking and whispering got on my nerves." He hadn't let go of her hand. "Besides, I already have you."

Heat bloomed in her cheeks; she was sure her face was flushed pink, but she simply raised her chin. "I'm glad."

He gave her hand one last squeeze before letting go. "As much as I'd love to spend time with you, there are other matters to deal with." Behind them, Lorenza and Julong appeared, supporting Urdu between them.

The elderly mage was looking better now. His eyes were more focused, and he could walk as long as he had some form of support. They had cared for him on the ship—they had done their best without proper healers. His long, horse-like face and yellow eyes reminded her of Moira. But after living with a demonic face for decades, Sybil did not find him especially ugly or grotesque.

Sybil went to the elderly mage. "How are you feeling, Master Urdu?"

He cracked a smile. "Much better than being trapped in that cave."

"We'll see that you get all the medical care required," Gerald said. "Hopefully it won't be long before you'll be restored back to your old self." They'd need his help to perform the countercurse later, but that would have to wait.

In the palace, they passed several servants and courtiers before a lovely young woman with silvery blond hair and powder blue eyes hurried toward them.

"Gerald!" It was the loudest Sybil had ever heard the princess utter. Iliana was walking at a brisk pace toward Gerald, her eyes shining. What had happened to Iliana while they were away? Had the princess finally found the courage to act normally in the presence of the man she fancied?

"Princess." Gerald bowed, his diplomatic expression firmly in place. "A pleasure to see you."

"I was worried," she said, staring at him with wide, attentive eyes. "I wished I could've gone with you. So glad I was when they informed me of your safe return." Iliana's gaze strayed to Sybil, who was standing a few steps behind Gerald. The princess's eyes widened.

Meeting Iliana's polite but puzzled frown, Sybil stepped forward and curtsied. "Your Highness. My name is Sybil de la Roche; I come from a distant region in the northeast of Savony."

"Lady Sybil is an old friend," Gerald said, taking Sybil's hand. "She accompanied me on the journey to seek Urdu."

“She did? But why...” Iliana’s gaze roved between them, and finally at their linked hands. A small gasp escaped her and she put a hand over her mouth.

“Your Highness!” Ethan said, approaching them and offering his arm. “How wonderful it is to see you! Your beauty is even more dazzling than when we met last time. It eclipses the sun.”

“May I escort you, Your Highness?” Enzo added, also thrusting out his elbow. “I must say, the journey has been exhausting, but now that I’ve seen you, I’m renewed and invigorated.”

Iliana shook her head. “Your kindness is appreciated but unnecessary. The servants will bring you to your rooms. Please excuse me.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

The poor girl. Sybil felt no satisfaction, only sympathy for the young princess. She knew what it was like to suffer rejection, though in her case the men had behaved far more dramatically than Gerald.

“Perhaps we should have informed her about us in a more opportune moment, or let the maids mention in an offhand manner to her,” she said in a low voice. “She had been anticipating your return, and it seems unnecessary to cause her immediate disappointment.”

Gerald frowned and looked down at their hands. “I hadn’t expected she would take it so badly.”

He might appear thoughtful and considerate, but he could be a little ignorant when it came to women. But there was nothing they could do about Iliana for now. At least, as the Arksan princess, she would have little problem seeking another man. Savony alone had plenty of princes for her to choose from.

When they reached their rooms, another figure appeared. A middle-aged man, shorter than average, with blond hair and blue eyes. He stopped when his gaze fell on Sybil. The look on his face was pure shock, as if he had seen a ghost.

Sybil was exhausted from the journey, but she let go of Gerald’s hand and went straight to the man.

“My lady?” He looked like he wanted to weep.

“Laurent,” she said, holding out her hands. “It’s me. The curse is broken.”

“I had felt an immense weight was lifted from my body, about a week or so ago,” he said, grasping her hands. He stared at her, as if she were

from another world. “I wondered if it was possible that the curse was gone, but I had no proof about it. But now that I’ve seen you—” his voice shook and a tear ran down his face “—I know it’s true. Was it Prince Gerald who broke your curse?”

“Yes.”

Laurent made a low bow toward Gerald. “My deepest gratitude to you, Your Highness. You have saved us all.”

“Not everyone, unfortunately,” Sybil said. She couldn’t keep the truth from him, once he discovered her maid wasn’t with her. “Victoire was taken by one of the witches.”

“Then we must save her!” Laurent said, alarmed. “You must be exhausted, but aren’t there other mages? I’ve heard that others will be arriving.”

“No, Laurent,” Sybil said gently. Taking him by the shoulders, she told him how Sorcha had used a spell to occupy Victoire’s body. “She’s gone. I might have come to the same fate, if the mages didn’t arrive on time.”

He looked as if she had taken a huge wooden staff and struck him on the head. Victoire wasn’t his daughter, but he treated her just as if she were one of his own. “Victoire...gone? I can’t believe...poor Margot...the poor child...” More tears ran down his cheeks. Sybil put her arm around him, knowing how rare it was for her steward to so publicly display his emotion.

“I’m sorry, Laurent.”

His cries were muffled against her shoulder. As she held him, Sybil silently vowed that she would do everything she could to find Moira. She wasn’t a mage, but she could look up information. She could acquire magical ingredients and create spells. Moira and Sorcha had to be stopped. No more innocent maids were to be sacrificed.

* * *

ONCE SYBIL HAD BATHED and rested, it was near evening. She contemplated setting off to Savony the next morning. Perhaps she should take leave of the king and queen tonight. Express her gratitude for their hospitality, and go home. She’d return, to help with the battle against Moira, but she had to break the news about the curse and Victoire to her

servants. The pain returned for a moment when she saw Victoire's empty bed, set up on the other side of the room, the pillow and blankets neatly made. She'd never see her maid's cheery face or hear her greeting happily in that optimistic tone.

When she emerged from her room, dressed in a simple white gown, a maid was heading in her direction.

"Lady Sybil." The maid curtsied and flushed. The same maid had regarded her with fear when she had her veil on. "You are summoned to a meeting with the Savon princes and their friends."

Sybil was led to a small room. Two burly guards stood outside, both of them stunned when she approached. One stuttered, the other fumbled with the door knob, before she went in.

Maybe she should ask Gerald where he got his spectacles.

Inside the room, she wasn't surprised to see Freja, while the Savon princes—Gerald, Ethan, Enzo—and the two mages, Lorenza and Julong, gathered around the table. She was surprised, though, at the addition of two people. One was a lanky man wearing glasses, while the other was a woman with painted nails and her eyes rimmed with kohl.

"Sybil." Gerald rose and guided her to the chair next to him. "Sorry about making you come here after we've just returned, but Freja's here, and she wants to know all what happened."

She smiled and shook her head. "I don't mind."

"Is that the lady who was cursed by Moira?" The lanky man pushed his spectacles up on his nose and stared at her if she were a rare animal. "I can see why the witch wanted to possess her."

"Don't stare; it's rude." The painted-nails woman jabbed his shoulder. "Sorry, have we performed introductions yet? I'm Tamarka, and this is my brother, Morkel. We're both friends of Freja and came to assist her when she mentioned there was a countercurse to do."

"We could've been here earlier—" Morkel sat back on his chair "—if Tamarka wasn't keen on performing a body transformation."

"What kind of transformation?" Sybil asked. Goodness, did Tamarka take another body like Moira did?

"Oh no, don't look so alarmed, child," Tamarka said, though she only looked several years older than Sybil. "I was born a man, but I detested breeches, and people started giving me funny looks when I tried to dress like a woman. So I looked up the grimoires, and found a way to turn my

body into a woman. You can't tell that I was a man, can you?" She stabbed a pointy fingernail in Sybil's direction and grinned.

"You look lovely," Sybil said, and she meant it. Tamarka must have been a handsome man with feminine looks, and therefore made the transition from man to woman quite well. "More beautiful than an average woman."

"I'll take it as the highest compliment, coming from a beauty like you," Tamarka said, looking pleased. "I've heard rumors that you're a proud little thing, but those rumors cannot be more far away from the truth. You do have some pride, judging from the tilt of that chin, but you're not stingy with praise. Are you promised to anyone? If not, I can think of a few men who'd be delighted to..."

"Perhaps we should start the discussion," Gerald said. His tone was calm, his expression respectful, but there was a steely undertone that indicated he was keen to change the subject.

"Leave the chitchat until after this meeting, Tamarka," Freja said, placing her elbows on the table. "Now that Sybil's here, tell me what happened to you on the island."

"Islands," Enzo corrected. "We had to stop in the south because that evil witch tossed our supplies overboard. She then kidnapped Gerald and Sybil and took them to another island."

Gerald narrated the story, with Sybil filling in bits and pieces. "If it weren't for Lorenza and Julong arriving just in time, Sybil would've been dead," he said, casting a grateful look at the two mages. Julong couldn't see, but a benevolent smile appeared across the Lulan mage's face.

Sybil bowed her head. "I owe my lives to both of you."

"My life, too," Gerald said. "I might be allowed to keep my life, but living under the witch's tyranny as her *consort*—" he spat the word as if it were poison "—is little better than being dead."

"We're glad to help," Lorenza said, with a flick of her hand, as if she'd done nothing but pass butter across the table. "The bigger problem is how we are to stop Moira? She didn't succeed getting Sybil, so she's going to capture another girl."

"But we've rescued Master Urdu," Gerald pointed out. "Moira and Sorcha can't draw their magic from him anymore."

"But she still has enough for at least another transformation spell," Sybil said.

“We’ll have to keep an eye out for her,” Freja said. “Twenty years ago, it took ten of us to defeat her, leaving her powerless and alone. We thought she would learn the errors of her ways and cease using forbidden spells. But she kidnapped her father and has been drawing power from him.”

“What should we do?” Tamarka said.

“We have to be ruthless,” Freja said, rubbing her forehead. “Once she emerges, we’ll put a seal on her, making sure she can’t draw power from another mage again. By then, Urdu should be recovered as well.”

“What if he sides with his daughter and refuses to help us?” Lorenza asked.

“We’ll divide into two groups,” Gerald said, drawing their attention. “We saved Urdu’s life; he owes us a favor. We can ask him to deal with the trolls. The other group can focus on sealing Moira’s power.”

The mages looked each other. “Sounds like a plan,” Julong said approvingly. “I volunteer to be in Moira’s group.”

“Just a moment,” Morkel said. “Your Highness, I heard from your brother that you have Antoine’s Peerless Knife? It’s a bottomless repository for magic. If we harness the magic within, we’ll be well equipped for dealing with either Moira or the trolls.”

Gerald blanched. “I’m afraid Sorcha has the Peerless Knife. When I cut the amulet from her and Moira found us, Sorcha picked up the knife and amulet. I couldn’t retrieve it because I was trussed up at the time.”

The other mages looked at each other, fear in their eyes. Lorenza bit her lip and clasped her hands. “Perhaps Moira and Sorcha might not figure out there’s magic contained in the knife.”

But her words lacked conviction. Both Moira and Sorcha were witches who lived for decades and had plenty of experience with magic. The Peerless Knife, with its unusual color and sharpness, was bound to make the witches take notice and investigate its qualities.

“Well,” Enzo said brightly. “It’s really simple. All we have to do is steal the Peerless Knife back when she isn’t looking.”

Lorenza rolled her eyes. Julong looked away, but an amused smile quirked his lips.

“At least we’ve accomplished something,” Ethan said, in a valiant effort to appear optimistic and hopeful. “Sybil’s back, and so is Urdu. Didn’t you say he’s the most powerful mage alive? Surely that has to count as an advantage.”

“Right,” Freja said briskly. She brought out a notebook and flipped it open. “Since there’s no way we can undo this, we might as well figure out the next step.”

Half an hour later, they emerged from the discussion room. Julong and Lorenza, who both had healers’ training in magic, were to stay with Urdu and assist the elderly mage for a speedy recovery. Freja was to continue to work on the countercurse. Tamarka and Morkel were to return to Savony with the princes and investigate the underground lair. They had to learn the trolls’ real names. The countercurse would only work if they had knowledge of the trolls’ names.

Sybil was to return to her manor, but she promised to come to the Savony castle once she made sure her servants were all freed from the curse, and after performing a proper mourning ceremony for Victoire. As Sybil was decent at spellmaking, Gerald suggested that she could come to the castle and help them create more defensive weapons and tracking spells.

“Keep in touch,” Freja said, handing out new bracelets. “If you have any sign of Moira, or any progress with trolls, send an oral message immediately.”

CHAPTER 37

"May I come in?"

Sybil looked up from her packing. Gerald stood in the doorway, a hand on the frame.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to impede you while you're busy." He took a tentative step into the room. "Can I help you?"

"If you're good at packing." Sybil pointed at a half-filled trunk. "I never had to pack for myself, but now that Victoire's gone..." She shook her head and told herself to pull herself together. "It's harder when doing it for the first time."

"Let me help you." Gerald folded the dresses and placed them neatly in the trunk. For a prince who had servants waiting on him head to foot, he was surprisingly efficient at folding clothes.

Sybil wanted to touch him, to run her fingers through his silky blond locks, but she held back. The door to her room was open, so anyone could see through.

It didn't take long before the trunks were packed. Sybil packed a trunkful of Victoire's clothes and accessories; she wanted to bring them back to Margot. She was sorry that she couldn't save the enamel locket. Sorcha must have disposed of it, or transformed the locket into the amulet she wore.

Once they were done, Gerald rose from the floor where he was crouching, and came over to her, standing by the window.

"How long do you think it will take?"

"What do you mean?"

“When will you finish taking care of things at home and come to the castle?”

Sybil put a finger on her chin and did a mental calculation. “A few weeks at least. I’m not sure what my servants will want to do, now they’re free. Their contracts with me have long expired. I may need to write letters of reference, see that everyone has found a position, and...”

“Cannot Laurent do that for you?”

“Laurent won’t stay for long. He’s grown attached to his nephew’s family and has plans to relocate to Linberg as soon as possible.”

“Not before convincing Margot to come with him.”

“You know about them?”

Gerald shrugged. “There wasn’t much else to do at the manor, and you avoided my company as much as possible.”

“That was because of the curse,” Sybil said. “I was afraid to let myself spend too much time with you, in case I let myself get attached.”

“But you succumbed eventually.”

He was testing her pride. But after all they had been through, she wasn’t too proud to admit her weakness.

“I did.” She looked into his eyes, hoping she wasn’t blushing like a huge ripe tomato.

He broke into a radiant smile. “So I take it that your affection for me hasn’t changed? You can have your pick of any man in the kingdoms now.”

“I don’t want anyone else,” Sybil said indignantly. “I may have pride, but I meant it when I proposed to you. And where else can I find a man who’s willing to sit in front of the fire and discuss books with me?”

“Quite a few would be willing to do that, as long as they can behold your beauty.”

“Gerald.”

“All right, I’m sorry.” He held up his hands. “That was a lame attempt of mine to hear your confirmation. But it still hasn’t solved my problem.” He took her hands, held them tenderly as if her hands were formed of crystal. “Sybil de la Roche, what do you say if we marry right now?”

She stared. “Before we start on the journey back to Savony?”

“If you don’t mind.” He smiled, but there was nervousness in his expression.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do it right away.”

Gerald's smile faltered, but he nodded. "I understand. It was hasty of me, but I cannot help wanting to claim you before you went back to the manor. There will be weeks, many weeks perhaps, before we meet again."

"If it were only me involved, I would marry you right away," Sybil quickly said, looking into his eyes. "But I want Laurent, Margot, Bernardin, and the rest of my servants to be present at the wedding ceremony. They've been with me so long that they're like family to me."

"Understood. Now that you mention them, I want my brothers to attend the wedding as well. A pity, but I suppose we'll have to wait."

"But we can get engaged." She looked out of the window. It was still afternoon and carriages were coming to and from the palace. "Let's make a quick trip to the jewelry stores, buy the rings, and perform a simple ceremony."

Gerald's face lightened up. He looked so dazzlingly beautiful that she wished she knew how to paint. She wanted to capture that moment of him on canvas.

Then he was pulling her toward the door, his footsteps eager. "Come."

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER, Gerald and Sybil stood in his suite. Both were dressed in their best clothes—Gerald in an indigo tunic, which set off his blond hair, and Sybil in a crimson gown, her raven hair streaming down her back. Around them were the twins and Laurent, acting as witnesses.

"And now...I pronounce you husband and wife!" Enzo said with a dramatic flourish of his arm.

"That's what you say at a wedding," Ethan said, elbowing his brother. "This is just an engagement, you loggerhead."

Laurent looked on with a smile filled with happiness. A tear glistened in his eye. It was arranged that when the wedding took place, he would stand in as Sybil's father and give her away.

Gerald slipped the glittering engagement ring on Sybil's finger, while she did the same to him.

He suddenly pulled her to him, both hands clasping her shoulders. "Don't let me wait too long. Or I'll come riding to your manor."

Sybil smiled, feeling bliss spread through her heart to her entire body. Leaning forward, she kissed him right in front of everyone. The twins cheered.

“I promise, Gerald.”

His face glowed, his arms clasped around her waist. She read the affection in his eyes, and for that moment, she wished this was a wedding ceremony. She didn’t want to part from him, didn’t want to go separate ways when they returned to Savony.

Just at the moment, a page boy burst into the room. He skidded to a halt; his face went red and he stammered, “Forgive me, Your Highness, but you’ve a letter from the castle. Messenger said it was urgent.”

It was as if it started snowing in the room. Gerald let go of Sybil and took the letter. When he read it, his face had gone pale, as if Moira suddenly appeared in front of him.

Alarmed, Sybil stepped closer. So did the twins.

“What is it?” Enzo asked.

Gerald looked up. “Two trolls have broken loose from underground. They ate a scullery maid who comes regularly to clean our tower. Selma is seriously injured. Theo and Julian, along with the palace guards, have killed the trolls, but the problem is how to keep the rest from coming.”

Stunned silence greeted him. Sybil felt her blood run cold. Though she had never encountered a troll, her passion for books had given her a vivid imagination.

The twins were also white-faced and grim. “Has Theo done anything to stop the other trolls?” Ethan said.

“He had the guards build an immense wall of stone, fortified with non-breakable spells, but it’s not going to hold forever.” Gerald crumpled the letter. “We must tell Freja the news, and have Morkel and Tamarka come with us right away.”

“Let me help,” Sybil said.

Gerald shook his head. “Not now, Sybil. Stay at the manor and I’ll let you know when it’s safe to come.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he took her hands. “The last thing I want is to worry about my fiancée’s safety while protecting the castle from the trolls’ invasion. Don’t worry about me, Sybil. I haven’t forgotten it—one day we’ll be sitting in front of the fire, with hot chocolate and books. That day will come.”

It was useless to argue with him, when he had just received tragic news. Sybil nodded and tightened her fingers around his. “I’ll be waiting.”

But in her mind, a different voice spoke. As she watched Gerald and the twins leave the room, their faces grim, Sybil resolved she wasn’t going to sit back and watch them plunge into danger.

CHAPTER 38

Sybil felt uncommonly old and weary when the carriage pulled up outside the manor. So much had passed since she left, so much had happened. She looked up at the four-story building with its gray stone walls and arched windows. It was early spring—not an inch of snow could be found—and she felt like it was years ago when she discovered Gerald sprawled outside on the grounds.

She had expected Bernardin would be in the gardens. But in fact, all of her servants—about three dozen in total—had come out. Maybe Flavien saw the carriage from the third floor and told everyone. Or maybe a miraculous connection existed, and they sensed her arrival.

They surrounded the carriage, their faces filled with anticipation and excitement, as Laurent sprang from the box and opened the door. Sybil stepped down and there was a simultaneous "ooh" as they beheld her in her former beauty. She wore a simple white gown that lacked any lace or ruffles, and her hair was unbound, falling down her back in glossy waves, but as Laurent were to tell her later, she was more beautiful than when she was belle of the court and arrayed in silk and jewels.

"Lady." Margot came forward, her round face glowing. "By the magi, oh my, it's *you*. You've returned!"

Flavien was staring with his mouth wide open. "Was it Prince Gerald? Or was it the mage who broke the curse?"

Sybil held up a hand. The engagement ring glittered on her finger. "He proposed."

A scullery maid gasped and covered her mouth; Flavien turned to her with a triumphant grin and said, "I just knew it! I just knew he'd propose!"

Everyone smiled and laughed and offered Sybil congratulations. She smiled, but a bitter drop in her heart remained. The curse was broken, but an innocent life was claimed.

Margot held her hands out to Laurent. “Welcome home,” she said, her affection for him shining in her eyes. “And where’s Victoire? Had she fallen asleep in the carriage?”

His face grave, Laurent put his arm around her. He lowered his head, and in a low voice, told her what happened. Margot shook her head in disbelief when he was finished. She looked toward Sybil and clutched her arm. “Lady, this can’t be true. Victoire, my Victoire, was taken by that witch?”

Sybil wished there was a spell that could alleviate pain, but spells that tampered with the mind were forbidden. Her throat felt clogged, but she had to speak. “Sorcha did it. I’m so sorry, Margot.”

Margot let out a wail of anguish that pierced through the air. Sybil put her arms around the older woman and held her close, though she couldn’t hold back her tears either. During the trip on the sea back to Arksar and at the palace, she grieved but didn’t let herself go. Now, back at home, surrounded by people who knew and loved Victoire, she wept her heart out for her handmaid. Victoire, whose bright smile and cheerful mood had given her comfort in the lonely, long years of solitude. Sybil had narrowly escaped becoming the witches’ victim, but her maid had not.

Laurent and Flavien stood near, the latter crying silently for his sister. Around them, some of the servants were still in disbelief, asking the others how Victoire could be gone.

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER, Sybil sat at her desk, writing reference letters. She dipped her quill into the ink pot and paused, pondering on the most appropriate word to describe one of her footmen. Most of her servants had offered to stay at the manor, but she urged them to seek employment elsewhere.

“You’ve been trapped at this place for more than forty years,” she told them. “If you want what’s best for me, leave and explore the rest of the kingdom. Or go to Arksar, Masaro, even Lulan, anywhere. With four

decades of experience, I have no doubt you can find an excellent position. After a few years, if you truly wish to return, the manor will be waiting for you."

"Aren't you going to move to the castle to live with Prince Gerald?" Flavien asked.

"We discussed the possibility of making this our winter home," Sybil said. Warmth flowed through her heart at the thought. Books and hot chocolate in front of a blazing fireplace, in the company of the man she loved. "But I cannot say anything for certain until we marry."

Sybil closed her eyes for a second. She hadn't told her servants that she nearly lost her life in Finsoor. While she genuinely wished for them to leave the manor and make up for the years lost, she also didn't want them to know her plans. With the threat of the trolls and the witches, Sybil couldn't promise them she would return with Gerald.

A light knock sounded on her door and Laurent entered. "May I help you, milady?"

"I only have a few more to write," Sybil said. "How's Margot?"

"She is still in grief, but Flavien has persuaded her to eat a little." Laurent approached the desk. "Once she is in better shape, I plan to take her to Linberg. If she doesn't feel like going, I'm willing to wait. I have waited for forty years; I can wait a few more."

Sybil nodded. "I'm glad she has you. Will Flavien go to Linberg as well?"

"He's looking forward to meeting Arksan girls; he always found our blond hair and blue eyes appealing." Laurent formed a slight smile. "What about you, milady? I know you're concerned for Prince Gerald, but he wants you to be safe. As do all of us."

Sybil set her elbows on the desk. "I understand, but you can hardly expect me to stay here and do nothing. Do not worry, Laurent. I am not rushing off to the castle unarmed and unprepared."

Her voice carried an undertone of steel. Laurent looked on the ground for a second; he knew he couldn't argue with her.

"Promise me you'll take care of yourself, Lady," he said.

When the door closed behind him, Sybil rose and went to the window. Her reflection was visible in the glass, showing her a woman with flawless features. But she barely thought about her recovered beauty. All she could think of was her prince, her kingdom.

I'll do everything I can to help, she vowed, thinking of Gerald. *For that future we envisioned together.*

Time to fight.

EPILOGUE

It wasn't snowing when Freja appeared in the deep Arksan forest, but it was chilly nevertheless. She slipped into her pocket and extracted a small, corked bottle, and tapped on the glass to activate the heating spell within. As a mage, she could also call upon her innate magic, but she had a sudden desire to conserve as much magic as possible. For she sensed that the upcoming months were going to be tough.

Jar in hand, the heat from within traveling to her body, she pulled her hood over her head and made her way out of the forest. As she approached the cottage where she lived, she kept an eye out for Alrik. Every time she was away, the first thing she did when she got home was to look for him. He was the reason she was residing in this remote area of Arksar, using a false name, and doing her utmost best to keep him alive.

Keep him safe from Moira's clutches. From what Gerald and Sybil had told her, the witch did not seem to know that the prince of Arksar was still alive.

"Aunt Freja!" Alrik stopped when he saw her. He was carrying a load of firewood. Tall, broad-shouldered, a mass of blond curls, and a pair of twinkling blue eyes. Dressed in a plain, gray sweater that an old woman knitted for him, he looked like any common lad. If he grew up in the palace, he might have fewer calluses.

"Welcome back! You're just in time for dinner." He hefted the firewood in his arms. "Gabi's making stew—again." He made a face. Freja understood that expression. Her niece wasn't talented when it came to

cooking. “I wanted to cook instead, but she insisted that she’d do it and my strength is better put to use with getting wood from the shed.”

“You’d better be thankful you’re getting three square meals a day,” Freja said severely, though she knew well why Gabi didn’t allow Alrik in the kitchen.

Twenty years ago, Moira had cursed King Tyrell’s son to die on his twenty-first birthday. The method was through piercing his finger on a knife, a spindle, or just anything sharp enough. Freja had managed to modify the curse into a version less lethal—if Alrik pricked his finger, he’d fall into a deep sleep instead. Still, as Alrik’s twenty-first birthday was next month and Moira had made an appearance, Freja was worried. If Moira figured out how to use the magic in the Peerless Knife…they’d be in trouble.

“Auntie!” Gabi came out of the cottage, wearing a large apron and holding a wooden spoon. “You’re back! Get in, both of you, before you catch cold and I’ll have the thankless task of nursing you two.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you’re nursing me.” Alrik grinned. “But no stew. I’ll never get better if you feed me that stuff.”

“What were you expecting, a five-course meal from Savony?” Gabi poked his chest with the spoon. “And that’s only half of the firewood I need. You have to bring me more.”

Alrik, muttering that she was a pain to live with, followed her into the cottage. For a moment, Freja allowed herself relapse into the moment twenty years earlier, when they brought Alrik to this place, when he was a tiny, screaming baby.

How will he react when he learns the truth? That he isn’t a common lad and is in fact heir to the throne, brother to Princess Iliana?

Next month. She’d have to get ready for next month, when he turned twenty-one. With the additional stress from the countercurse for the trolls, it was going to be an epic challenge.

AFTERWORD

Dear readers,

I hope you've enjoyed *The Beast & the Beauty*! Please consider leaving a review online. Any feedback is greatly appreciated, and helps other readers discover the book.

Book 3, *The Cursed Prince*, will continue the series' gender-bend theme in a retelling of Sleeping Beauty. It will feature Prince Alrik, the Arksan king's son who is thought to be dead, and Freja's niece, Gabi, who is sworn to protect Alrik with her life.

To learn when *The Cursed Prince* will be released, sign up here: http://www.ayaling.com/newsletter.html

What you'll get for joining the club:

1. Receive exclusive short stories written to accompany my novels.
2. Be the first to know when I have a new release.
3. Be the first to know when I give away free stuff, run a poll, or other fun activities.

See you next book!

~Aya~

BOOKS BY AYA

REVERSED RETELLINGS

Till Midnight (Book 1)

The Beast & the Beauty (Book 2)

The Cursed Prince (Book 3, to be released in 2019)

UNFINISHED FAIRY TALES

The Ugly Stepsister (Book 1)

Princess of Athelia (Book 1.5)

Twice Upon a Time (Book 2)

Ever After (Book 3)

Queen of Athelia (Book 4)

THE PRINCESS SERIES

Princesses Don't Get Fat

Princesses Don't Fight in Skirts

Princesses Don't Become Engineers

GIRL WITH FLYING WEAPONS

Girl with Flying Weapons

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aya is from Taiwan, where she struggles daily to contain her obsession with mouthwatering and unhealthy foods. Often she will devour a good book instead. Her favourite books include martial arts romances, fairy tale retellings, high fantasy, cozy mysteries, and manga.

www.ayaling.com